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argosy

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At the London School of Journalism we generally refrain from publishing testimonials in our announcements, but this, we think, is quite out of the ordinary. The writer is an invalid, bed-ridden, and has not left her bed for two years.

Dear Mr. Butler,

Thank you very much for your letter. It was nice of you to write. I have had nine acceptances to date, most of them overseas, strangely enough. One of my stories sold three times, in England, Norway and Denmark. I am very grateful indeed to the LSJ for all you have done for me. I am sure I would have got nowhere at all without the LSJ.

(She continues about her health. She spent five months in hospital last year and adds: "I will never be strong, my heart is permanently affected.")

I am sure you will understand that this makes me even more grateful that I have achieved something with my writing. I feel as if my life's not being wasted, that I can still have a career in spite of everything, which is good for my morale. Life would have been rather grim these last few years without it. I shall always be grateful to the LSJ for the encouragement to continue however ill I was feeling. I can truthfully say it has made all the difference.

(Five weeks later the same student writes:)

I just wanted to tell you the latest news. This week I have had two stories accepted by a women's magazine for fifty guineas each. As you can imagine, I am overjoyed . . . When I first started with the LSJ I said in my first lesson that my ambition was to write for magazines such as Woman and Woman's Own. So you will understand what this success means to me. I could never have got there without the LSJ. It is wonderful how my coach always puts his finger on the weak spots. I shall never cease to be grateful to you.

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WATCH HIM AT WORK

GEORGES SIMENON

Interviewed by

HUW WHELDON

When Huw Wheldon created Monitor and with superb Welsh wizardry attracted three and a quarter million ardent viewers, he did so on the principle that intelligence is a matter of the heart, knowledge something you've been told about. Simenon produced in Maigret a man who personifies this principle. Both seek with the people they encounter, that elusive, all-revealing moment of truth.

WHELDON: Monsieur Simenon, it seems that your wife is nothing short of a dynamo, running both the house and the business side of your life.

SIMENON: It is quite true. She takes care of so many things that I get lazier and lazier. For ten years, for example, I did not answer the phone—not one single time. And I don't write letters any more. I don't do anything but novels, the only thing I'm good at. When I met her she knew nothing about publishing and movies, but now she has learnt so much that she is always the one who discusses things with the lawyers—and she generally wins her case!

WHELDON: A lot of the novels you write, not simply the Maigret ones, move towards the limits of violence. Why is this?

SIMENON: I think that the novel of today is the equivalent of the tragedy of the classics. For the classics, the character has to be at the end of his tether. Somebody once asked Balzac: "Who is a character from a novel?" And he said, "Anybody in the street, if you push him to his limit." When I have a character, I

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think: What can happen to this chap to push him to extremes? And that is the only invention I have to make: to find in the first chapter, this situation—an accident in the street, an inheritance, anything that can happen to anybody.

WHELDON: You've described a writer's job as being a vocation of unhappiness.

SIMENON: Yes, certainly. Since you have to live yourself all those lives, which are most of the time, unhappy; so you live a big part of your life unhappy too.

WHELDON: Is the human nature that you're seeking to illuminate, human nature in general or, in the end, is it your own nature that you are trying to examine?

SIMENON: That is a very difficult question. I am not a man who psycho-analyses himself. Not at all. The critics do that, but I don't do it; so I never have the impression of putting myself in my novels. I don't care at all about myself, and I hope that I am not in my novels. My impression is that I try to understand other people but not myself.

WHELDON: You want to understand other people, but you don't see them in the way the classical novelist saw them.

SIMENON: I try, but in the classical novel you have what I call the dressed people. They have nice clothes, with all their reassurances around them, with their decorations, with their hat feathers, and everything. It is the man as he would like to be. But in the novel of today what we are trying to find is the real man—looking at himself in the mirror while shaving in the morning. That is a terrible sight for everyone, what we call in France la minute de vérité, the moment of truth. That's what I try to find in every man. I like to find the true man behind all the dress, the education, and everything.

WHELDON: You write a tremendous number of novels, about six a year. It is said that you write them literally in eleven days.

SIMENON: Yes, that's the maximum. I write a chapter a day—my chapter is about twenty pages—and my novels have between nine and twelve chapters.

WHELDON: I gather that you don't think of the plot of your novels before you start writing them.

SIMENON: Never. Not even the day I start. I never know the plot of my novels. I don't even like this word. What I try to have first . . . I don't try anything. It comes to me when I'm walking in the country, or anywhere, a vague feeling of music, or the smell of something. The smell of the cows, for instance,

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may remind me of another country, when I was twelve. I remember the people around then. I remember the village. And, little by little, I start to live in another place. Then, knowing the people, I have to ask the question, what can happen to those people? What can push them to their limit? This is the big question. And then I start my novel. And from then on I am those people. I am not, any more, myself, but I live their lives. I suffer for them. I am absolutely all the characters of my novel.

WHELDON: This is your vocation-of-unhappiness point again.

SIMENON: Yes. And also I am unhappy because I think you never reach the goal. For forty years now I have tried to write with more simplicity, and to go deeper and deeper into human nature. And, at the age of sixty-five, I realise that I am far away from this goal. I need forty more years and don't have them.

WHELDON: By English standards, your novels are short ones. This must be connected in some way with this method of going absolutely flat out at it for eleven days.

SIMENON: The reason why I work only eleven days is that I am not strong enough to work longer. You know, it's such a strain to be all these other people, and at the same time to be yourself. I can't do more. After eleven or twelve days I am so tired I have to stop. I can give you an example. I remember a few years ago I was writing a novel, the main character was an old lawyer. Every morning, he used to go into the cellars, take four or five bottles of burgundy and put them near his fireplace, then drink them little by little, being always mad and sad; and after three or four days, one of the servants went to my wife and said, " Madame, do you think that the novel will be very long? Because the library is no more possible." I was myself getting like my character. Disagreeable.

WHELDON: I know that when you approach this business of writing a novel in eleven days, you approach it like a championship runner. It's a girding-up process. What exactly is the routine?

SIMENON: It is not only routine. It is a number of manias, many little manias going tug, tug, one after the other. For instance, after having the rhythm, the musical time, of a novel; after having found the setting, the country: Belgium, France, America; the main character: a farmer, a tailor, any profession, I have to find them a name. That is the first question, and a very important one. And I have, I think, a hundred and fifty telephone books from all different countries. So I take one or two telephone books, and always from a different country.

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And if my novel happens to be in New York, I will take the Boston phone book, or Chicago—because of lawsuits. I open the book and take a piece of paper, and write a lot of names, sometimes two hundred.

Then I have another mania, the mania of my ball, here. It is a golden ball which my wife gave me, just to play with. And then I will play for hours, fingering it, feeling it in my hand while I am thinking, repeating the names. Sometimes I try for two hours for a single name.

Then, when I have my three, four, five names, I will take an envelope, another mania, always a yellow envelope. I close it and I start writing my names, their addresses, the names of their grandfathers, their fathers, their grandmothers, even their illnesses and what happened when they were five or six. Probably I will not use these clues at all, but I need them to know my characters perfectly. Probably I would not speak about the grandfather, about his job, but I need to know it. And then something else. I have to make a plan of their house. I need to know where the door is going to open, how many windows, every detail. Again, maybe I won't need to go to the third floor, but I need to know how it looks.

My manias help me get, little by little, into the inside of my characters, and to get to know every usual object they have around them. I have to know, perfectly, how they go about, everything about their house, then I feel at home myself. And I feel as if I'm in their skin.

WHELDON: You do all this before you start the actual writing?

SIMENON: Completely. I have to know everything before even thinking about the action. I know nothing about the action, and then, in the afternoon, I go and walk in the country. But the last preparation is on the evening before I begin a novel. Because at this time I am just in a state to write, and I am nervous. I have to fix everything like an acrobat.

I arrange in my turret a little table for my cup of coffee, for my sugar. I sharpen my pencils, about eighty, in this bowl. I get my paper ready. My wife in the next room cleans my pipes, and when everything is fixed I go to bed.

In the morning at six I get out of bed. I make my coffee myself. Nobody in the house has the right to get up before I start writing. Then I put a *Do Not Disturb* notice on the door and start writing.

WHELDON: You do that absolutely solidly . . . ?

SIMENON: For about three hours—every morning. If I don't do it in the morning the novel has to go in the waste-basket, and I

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never return to that novel again. It has happened three times in my life.

WHELDON: And to be a novelist of this kind, you find you need the efficiency of this library, this house, these little routines.

SIMENON: Certainly, I need this climate. I am alone to write my novels, but I need to know that all the house around me is helping me. You understand?

WHELDON: Why do you choose to live in this village of Echandens?

SIMENON: It is difficult to say why I have chosen to live in seven different parts of America, or Canada; in twelve different parts of France; but always, always in a village. And I always choose a village near a town of fifty to a hundred thousand people, and near a small town too. I like a village because I have plain people around me, people of one trade: farmers, cabinet-makers, plumbers.

I love talking to those people because I learn different things from them. Some have business coming from the soil and depend on natural elements, they have to fight rain, drought or thunder-storms. Others work with natural and no less basic materials like iron, wood, leather, clay. You know I like very much iron, wood, and leather, and the people who work with them are always very interesting. They have always in their hands something strong to work with, and I think it's very important in life. There is nothing thin in the air. Often these farmers and artisans give you the feeling that they are made of the stuff they handle; faces of wood, of clay, of iron; old people looking like old trees.

WHELDON: You don't want literary people round you?

SIMENON: To see them once a year is enough. When I speak with fellow artists or writers they always speak about art, about writing, and philosophy, and books, which doesn't interest me at all. I much prefer the market. Once or twice a week I go to our neighbouring market which is in Morges. Markets, again, are almost as old as the world. They are the most primitive contact between men, each one coming in with his products.

When I was young, four or five, my mother used to take me with her to the market at Liége at six o'clock in the summer, seven or eight in the winter; and I have still in my nose the smell of fresh onions, the vegetables, the simple beauty of a green cabbage or a pumpkin, the magnificence of baskets full of apples or apricots, the majesty of a big round Swiss cheese. I have tried to give the same memories to my children. Other days I walk alone, sniffing, looking around, chatting here and there about the weather, the

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cows, the flowers, or the last harvest. There is always a café somewhere near the market, and I love to sit there alone, or with my friend the Chief of Police. He knows everybody around, the good and the bad. He knows the best and worst of everyone.

At such times I am not working, not studying human nature, not looking for tragedy either, although each life carries a tragedy. However, maybe in five years, maybe in ten, one of those faces may come back to my mind even more alive than today. What has happened to this man or this woman in those five or ten years? I will try to answer, and, since I am a novelist, the answer will be a book.

WHELDON: Some of your critics have suggested that you use your knowledge and experience of daily life too extravagantly, that you write too many novels.

SIMENON: I apologise to those critics, but I consider myself more or less an artisan. A painter in the Renaissance used to work every day, to paint every morning. And without comparing myself with anybody, since I am just a little man, Lope de Vega wrote seven hundred plays, Balzac wrote forty pages a night, Shakespeare used to write about two plays a year. And not only did he have to write them, he had to act in them, and be the manager of the theatre, too. So there is nothing special, nothing extraordinary, about writing five or six novels a year. What is extraordinary is to write one novel every five or six years. It's a new trend. There are not now so many professional writers. The professor who writes novels instead of writing books about philosophy, morals, ethics and so on—forty years ago a philosopher would be ashamed to sign a novel . . . and every woman who after her first sexual experience writes a novel about it—they are not novelists.

WHELDON: Would it occur to you to claim that all the hundred and sixty-nine books you have written so far are signposts along a voyage of self-discovery?

SIMENON: Not at all. When I decided to be a novelist, I set out to learn my trade like an apprentice. First I tried to write pulp novels. I think I wrote about two hundred of those, and after four or five years I felt that was enough. Then I started writing what I called, at that time, semi-literary novels—the Maigret detective stories. I wrote about twenty-two of them. After Maigret, I got the feeling again that I could go a step further, not having cops anywhere any more. Then I wrote just straight novels. Since then, over about twenty years, I have written many novels —trying in each one to penetrate a little deeper into human nature.

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The Savage Spring

by JANE GASKELL

MINNA SCRIBBINS saw Jake at the same time she saw the farm. The sight of Jake made up for that of the farm.

Old Tombstone stopped the buggy. He made no motion to hand her down or help with her luggage. She began to swing herself gingerly down, her foot catching in her best petticoats which were longer than she was used to.

An arm behind her lifted her in the air before swishing her to earth. It was a strong arm. She could feel her middle all squeezed as she turned.

"Why, thank you, Jake."

"Tombstone," Jake said, "throw me down Missy's case."

The spare old man's mouth turned down at an even steeper angle, like an inverted vee. Very slowly he reached a knobby arm for the case and the carpet-bag strapped to it. He turned awkwardly from his seat so that Jake appeared nearer the luggage after all. But Jake made no move.

Shouldering Minna's gear at last, Jake strode up the steep incline. The wild grass screamed in the wind against his knees. Tombstone slapped at the mare's red rump, and the buggy creaked away.

"All right?" Jake said.

"It's steep—" Minna said.

"Take your gloves off. Grasp the grass, it won't pull up.

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Here, give me that thing." Minna handed over her little parasol which he tucked under one arm.

" Get here O.K.? Tombstone meet you at the station? "

" Well, to tell true, he was a mite late. But I had a fine conversation with the stationmaster. Old Benny, he says everyone calls him—? "

She glanced up aside at Jake. Oh yes, she did like that smile of his as well as she remembered it. She was glad it sounded already as though folks here were taking to her, telling her all about themselves . . .

" He said I'd do fine working here. Said Miss Laura has needed a girl a long time. Says all the Shore folks are wonderin' why she never got a maid in to help her years ago when the little boy was left with her—"

An energetic butterfly near blinded her. She took time off to agitate him away, and glanced at Jake again.

" Oh, she needs help all right. She was real pleased I'd hired you. I wired her I'd found a girl. She wired right back. She never wanted one of the local girls, that's all."

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" Why ever not, Jake? "

" Look, here we are. Didn't mind the bit of climb? We could have gone the buggy-road with Tombstone, that's flatter but it winds. This takes a couple minutes . . ."

Minna gasped a little. Her fingers combed her ringlets back in her bonnet but they wrestled out again. The wind stung her eyes. She thought she might look like she was crying.

" It looks quaint—" she said at last.

It was the only polite thing she could think of.

" Can tell no one's ever thought of modernising it," Jake agreed at once. " Least, no one who ever had the right to say go ahead, get on with it. But it's got trees alone worth a fortune."

" That windbreak? All bent—"

If Jake criticises it, Minna thought, I can go ahead and say what I think.

" Lombardies behind the place are straight, fine and straight," said Jake. " And the garden behind the graveyard is full o' trees, trees and flowers. That's what she'll tend to most now you're here."

" I'm glad I'm here, Jake."

And he said at once, " I'm glad you're here, and all."

The hot smile in his eyes made Minna mean it.

They passed the windbreak, and the sea-smell of the air on the ridge submitted with a good grace to the languor of leaves, sweet william, climbing roses, and herbs in a plot outside the sandstone-slab steps.

Jake didn't enter the house as if he were at home there.

He knocked on the half-open door.

Minna, who'd been about to enter, swayed and then stood behind him peering into the gloom of the kitchen. There seemed to be a fire in there, though it was warm now, the shore winds were bustling in the summer.

" Miss Laura," Jake called in an odd, unexpected voice with a tone in it that couldn't be called hushed, but was pleasant and respectful.

Nobody answered, and then in a few minutes Miss Laura came to the door.

She didn't give Jake a glance at all, and Minna felt immediate scrutiny on her. Really, Minna thought, what's this old maid got over me that I should be nervous of? She won't say she doesn't want me now. I'm as good as anyone.

She wished Jake had given back her parasol.

" This is Minna from Carlottatown, Miss Minna Scribbins," said Jake.

" Come in, Minna," Miss Laura said.

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Minna stepped after her into the old kitchen. It was bright in its own way. The fire in the sooty brick wall was spitting fragrant driftwood, flames leaping blue and gold, casting orange and rose flickers on the kitchen's humpy-hollowed sanded floor, and its smoke-blackened beams with hams and herbs hanging.

More light was stencilled on walls and floor from the two small windows, sunlight filtered past roses, and a steady red glowed in the cave of the oven.

"And you, Jake, come in," said Miss Laura.

Jake ducked his head and entered. He crooked his elbow at Minna who withdrew her parasol. Its frills had gone limp.

"Shall I take the gear up?" he asked.

"Yes. She's having the room under the eaves. Sit down, Minna. You shall see your room when Jake has put your luggage into it. Do you want to eat anything, to go to the lavatory?"

"I *would* like to see where to wash my hands," Minna said sedately.

Miss Laura didn't seem to notice that her language was rebuked. She kindled a candle from a log spitting like a cat, and led Minna through a back door with a wire screen on hinges to rebuff flies but admit air. Minna followed as close as she could without pushing. She wasn't going to be servile. She was a good maid, but it was Jake who'd hired her, and Jake by all accounts who was more boss in this place than most overseers are. Minna hadn't expected Jake's relationship with the old spinster to be so respectful, but Miss Laura must realise that without Jake running her place she'd be nowhere.

The women's skirts rustled on the flags between the sweet william. The candle flame looked silly in sunlight, a near-invisibility.

There was a wooden door under a lean of honeysuckle, bees making it loud.

"Take the candle," said Miss Laura. "It's dark."

All the amenities, thought Minna.

Miss Laura was still waiting when Minna had indeed washed her hands—to her surprise. There was a chugging of pipes in the air, a rushing of waters, like Genesis, but the bees appeared to be used to that.

Miss Laura thriftily blew out the candle. They rustled back along the walk to the kitchen. Minna kept wishing Miss Laura would walk quicker so Jake wouldn't be already there when they returned.

Miss Laura snicked the wire door.

"Are you busy, Jake?" she said. "Or would you like coffee while I give Minna something to stay her stomach?"

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" I ain't busy for a breather, ma'am," said Jake.

" Sit down, Minna. You too, Jake." He was leaning a long arm on the pinewood mantel.

Strong coffee was bubbling on the hob.

" What a nice big old-fashioned hearth," said Minna. " All it needs is a pussy purring." She hoped Jake was noticing how her ringlets shone copper in the flamelight.

" You didn't have hearths at the orphanage? " Miss Laura poured coffee into what could not be cups for company.

" Well, of course we did," Minna said, off balance. " But not big like this—little and square with kind of tiles round them."

How strong the coffee smells, she thought. I don't like that strong coffee. I like it watery out of a tureen like we had it at the orphanage.

" Do you have any pets? " she asked.

" Here is your coffee, Jake. And yours, Minna."

" Could I have a lot of cream in mine, if you please? " she said daintily. " I see you've a jug there—I just can't stand this kind of coffee."

" The only kind we brew here," Jake said at once.

" You may have some more hot water in it," said Miss Laura.

You stiff old spinster, Minna thought. Benny and all at the station were telling me Jake plans to buy this old ruin off you and then where will you be? No employer of mine.

" I just can't take it black," she said prettily. " I'm afraid it's like they call a refinement of the palate—just sure as anything makes me want to cough up. If you can't spare the cream, what about some pussy's milk? "

" We have no pets here," Miss Laura said with a suddenly chilly emphasis, and at the same time Jake said, " Ain't an animal in this house," so Minna had to disentangle the two sentences.

Miss Laura filled half Minna's cup with water and handed her a dish of hot cookies. Minna looked up and met Miss Laura's eyes. They were the blue of shadowed well-water, dusk-lit well-water. She's straitlacing right through to her heart, thought Minna. Those ain't honest-living eyes. They're old maid's eyes, the kind of eyes that reckon animals carry disease or something. She's all cheekbone and backbone and scragged-back hairbuns.

" Is Pel about, Jake? " asked Miss Laura. " I daresay he'd like a cookie, though it's not mealtime yet."

" He's about," said Jake. " I'll call him."

" I'll call him." She smiled. " Pelham! Pel! " she called from the door. " Would you like a cookie? Pel! "

The wire door banged and continued to bump as the boy shot

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through it. Minna thought that now the kitchen was really lit. He had a ruffle of curls mint-gold as though the wind were still tossing-glinting there, bare arms and feet slim and rosy-brown and he reached not quite high as her armpit.

He leapt to Miss Laura and hugged her hard with one arm while he grabbed the cookie with the other.

"Please and thank you, Pelham," said Miss Laura, but as though she were lit up too by his presence in her kitchen.

"Peesh'nthankoo," he laughed through a mouthful. He had a wide urchin's grin which spread across the angelic face, wrinkled the tilted nose, and unevenly slanted the huge azure eyes till they sparkled like racing waves.

"Pel, this is Miss Scribbins. You may call her Minna," said Miss Laura. (Without bothering to consult me, thought Minna.)

"Are you the girl Jake went to Carlottatown to choose from the orphanage?" Pel said.

"Yes, I am, Pel," she smiled back at him. "I hope we shall be good friends."

"I like your curls."

"Why, thank you, Pel!" She turned to laugh up at Jake. "Where did he learn this gallantry?"

"He schools down the Hollow," Miss Laura said. "Your hair, Pel, you might have been through a hedge or a storm. Have you fed the hens?"

Pel nodded. "Sure."

"You like hens?" said Minna. "Wouldn't you like a pussy or puppy of your own for in the house?"

The wire door was still bumping.

Pel turned to Miss Laura, his smile spreading without his eyes having caught up to it, his eyes still wide and turning a bluer blue. "Oh, could I, Aunt? Could I?"

"We have been through all this before, Pelham," Miss Laura said out of her silence.

I'll get it for poking my nose in, thought Minna. But poor kid. I'm not afraid of speaking up for a lonely kid. No other child or woman on this old place, and children are always allowed pets by people who understand 'em . . .

"Was Tombstone with you when you fed the hens?" pursued Miss Laura.

"I can feed them on my own. Oh, you know I'd look after a little cat, Aunt. You know."

Miss Laura looked across at Jake as though trapped. "I've told you not to do things without Tombstone," she said to Pel, but not looking at him. "Go and tend your face. You're all smears and smudges."

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If you looked at him, thought Minna, you wouldn't be able to bear the brightness pleading out of his eyes.

Pel began to trail from the kitchen, then dashed a hand across his eyes, put down his head, and belted through the main door.

Both doors continued to bang.

Minna sat up straight. I know when I'm in the right, she thought.

" Jake," said Miss Laura, " tell Minna how to reach her room. And now show her the laundry and dairy. I will take her wrap, the bonnet, and umbrella."

Why, she's not even bothering to tell me to mind my own business when she's already indicated her opinions on a matter.

Too astonished to be indignant, Minna handed over her frills and followed Jake down the path towards the pasture.

There was silence between them—except for the flap of the virile breeze, squawks and clucks of hens, joy of birds, and the distant lowing of cows, and beyond that the regular sough and swash of sea on shore—till they reached the dairy.

This faced on a rampant orchard.

Jake and Minna bent their heads, descended three steps like sponge-cushions of moss, and were in a dim coolness with big cans of milk everywhere. " They been skimmed early this morning," he said. " I reckon you'll be up in time to do it from now on, though."

" I guess I wasn't all that tactful," Minna said in the limpid twilight.

" You knew that already. Tact wasn't what I picked you for."

" She didn't bawl me out; she knew I was right really."

" You were wrong all the way, little Minna," he said. " That kid don't belong to anyone around here but Miss Laura. And she says no animals of his own."

" I'll get him a kitten or something he can smuggle away in a barn," she said nobly and stubbornly.

" You won't be anything to do with him."

" But I'm—"

" Don't think you been hired as nursemaid. Miss Laura wants you to take some of the house and farm chores off her hands while she has more time for the garden and the boy. But I'll still have time for you."

Jake suddenly backed Minna against an enormous cold milk-can. She put her hands back against it and said, " Oh," as the cold sprang out like dew on to her palms.

His mouth came down on hers and stayed fiercely but briefly. Before she realised it, he was savaging her neck and then he was pulling at the frills of her bodice.

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" My frills—" she mumbled.

Opening her eyes, she looked down at his lean foreshortened busy profile. He was mouthing the bared swell at the base of her throat. Hey, don't forget me left up here, she thought, but he cocked up a blue glance at her. She took exception to that too, hot though his glance was. He was not looking to see whether she minded this rather novel intimacy, to decide from her expression whether he should hold himself back or not, he'd glanced up merely to surprise on her face the desire he roused.

" Hey," she said loudly, trying to push him away, " you was nicer than this in Carlottatown. Everyone's telling me what to do round here, and I don't know that I'll stand for it. I'm a maid, not a slave."

" So, what am I telling you to do? Don't tell me I disgust you, I'd only laugh."

" You act like I'm to be practically a slave to any whim that old lady takes in her head—"

" She's not old."

" Oh no, she's *glorious*," Minna said angrily. " What's this kid to her, then, that she's sucking all the fun out of him to have him for herself? We had something like that in our street; wouldn't the neighbours laugh if they suspicioned he was hers? "

" I saw him when he arrived here. He hadn't been walking long. His parents were Miss Laura's kin—his mother was her sister—and they was drowned at sea. She treats him the only way he can be treated."

" You're so keen on her, I see what it is. Can't be an overseer without, I guess," she giggled, hoping she'd rile him. " I'm not surprised you wanted to pick a pretty Carlottatown orphan for a change."

Jake had straightened and drawn away from her.

" Miss Laura ain't the kind of woman you sleep with," he said.

" You're telling me! " Minna sneered.

Jake's hand lashed across the side of her face.

He climbed long-legged up the steps. He was among the orchard-trees when she reached him.

" I didn't mean to tease you! Jake! Honest! "

They sank to the flower-starred grass under the humming foliage.

" It's not a bad old place, Jake. I didn't mean to run it down. I know you must feel kind of part of it now. Only, back in Carlottatown you was warning me not to expect you to be only overseer much longer, and down the station they're expecting you to make a move soon—"

" She's letting me balance the books now. More juggling

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than balancing," he grinned, as he inserted a finger in one of her copper ringlets. " Here, stop fidgeting, I'll take off my sweat-rag and spread it to save your best dress. She's strict, but she's not interested in addition and subtraction. I been here a few years now; she reckons she can trust me." Minna giggled.

" I know what I'm doing," he said with energy. " I'm stashing it away, she don't even know I got a bank account of my own now and a bank manager who comes round the counter to shake my hand. I couldn't do that on my monthly hire she gives me. She don't realise the potential in this place, or rather she ain't bothered, because I've told her. Oh yes, I told her it could be worth some."

Minna shifted. Now that she wanted him to kiss her again, he couldn't talk of anything but cheating his Miss Laura.

" Well before I get to thirty," he said, " I'll be owner here. I'll buy her off, I'll show her she has to sell or go broke. I can show her. She's a stubborn high-nosed fine-speaking female, but I'll be in her house before long, and she can take her precious angel and go where she can find to go."

" You'd give her enough to get herself and the boy a home? "

" Some little house in town, that'll be better for them than a sprawling place no woman ever gets to the end of the work in. I'll be owner." He laughed at the closeness of his goal, he chuckled and slapped his chest, but the chuckle did not seem to well up from the contentment of a young hired hand near the summit of his ambition, and he turned to Minna as though she were a gulf to drown his awareness.

" The last storm of the season is having its fling," Miss Laura said. For two nights, and two days black as nights, the last storm had bawled round the farm.

" There'll be plenty of work up on the roofs when this blows itself out," Jake said through a mouthful of stew. " Shouldn't wonder there ain't a shingle or a tile left up there."

" I'm a mite worried about old Tombstone," Minna revealed. " Why does he refuse to join us all here? *Listen* to that storm! What if his hut-roof blows off? "

" Tombstone don't like being with folks," Pel said.

" Oh, Pel, love! " Minna exchanged smiles with him. "He likes you to tag everywhere he goes! "

" I'm not folks," the boy said.

Miss Laura dropped a ladle with a clatter on the bandy-legged stove.

" Minna," Jake said, " how come you ain't serving at table tonight? "

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"Oh, I been vomiting all day. When Pel and I found that chicken this morning—its head torn right off, Jake, and blood everyplace—we were both so distressed." She reached for the comfort of his lean knee under the table. "It wasn't the storm done *that*. It was some tramp or mad fiend took advantage of the storm to sneak in and do it. Poor Pel, you and I daren't go out now, do we?"

"Here, Miss Laura—" Jake jumped up—"that pot's too heavy for you."

"Mercy!" exclaimed Minna, gone white. "What was that?"

"Only Tombstone changed his mind. It's too rough out there, even for him." Jake went to open the door to the heavy blows upon it. "All right, wait a tick, you old—"

"I'm nearer," Miss Laura said briskly. She opened the door and a knife was pushed against her apron-front. Jake sprang forward with an oath that even at such a moment seemed to Minna an explosion in this kitchen.

"No, no, friend," rasped the stranger, still part of the howling murk outside. "You touch me and the lady gets a twist of this—"

"Get in then," Miss Laura urged him in an acid voice. "We'll be up in flames if we can't shut the door on this wind."

Without a change in his knife-arm, the newcomer was inside the kitchen, the door banged between the warmth and the storm. The candles righted the direction of their frantic flames, the fire stopped roaring hollowly as if it were straining out of the hearth.

"You're Brad Gautier," Pel pronounced.

"Right, son." The man turned a flash of white teeth in his direction. "Nice to be expected everywhere I go."

"We were expecting no escaped murderers here," Minna shrilled courageously.

"Hush, little Minna." Jake put a hand on her shoulder, and then was unable to resist caressing it, though this was a public incident. "What you here for, Gautier? Food, money?"

"I'm here for a roof and a bed," the man said with a grin of finality. "You'll all have to stay in this very room with me, I'm afraid. I'm a light sleeper and—" a knife splintered the table between Pel's fingers—"not a bad shot."

"How many knives you got, mister?" Pel asked, digging out that one.

Gautier shrugged. Rain-beads splattered about. "Good supply, tucked here and there. Give that one back nicely, kid." He still had the point of another at Miss Laura's waist. Pel came over with the hilt offered. His eyes were staring, very round and gulf-blue, his mouth hanging open a bit. Miss

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Laura's hand flashed out. There was a crash as Gautier flung her back against the sideboard.

"Don't none of you try anything else like that," he warned, his eyes darting but cool above the glittering point in his hand. "I killed once, I wouldn't give a —— about another killing."

"You killed the first time to stop your young brother being beaten up," Miss Laura said, panting slightly.

"But he was a notorious member of the Titus Brothers even before that," Minna said through defiantly clenched teeth. Her eyes flashed and her bosom rose and fell. But Gautier didn't look at her.

"Glad to see you all follow the news," Gautier said. "I'm sorry, lady, did I bruise you? Just, don't try anything, any of you. Is there a gun on this place?"

"I'll get Tombstone's for you," said Pel.

"Pel!" Miss Laura looked a sad old mess, Minna thought. When Gautier pushed her, her bun had come undone and there was straight heavy hair tumbling half-down half-up. Her cheeks were all flushed and there was a sort of fever in her pale eyes as she looked at Pel that the outlaw hadn't put there. "Pelham, you are to stay *right here.*"

"Don't go out in the storm, son," Gautier said kindly. "Don't go running to no hired hand, or down the town. Glad to see, lady, you got more concern for your boy's welfare than for getting me strung up."

"That will follow in its own time," Jake said. "Have your sleep, mister, have some of this meal. But behave yourself. Don't try hurtin' no one, leave the girl be."

"Why, she yours?" Still with his blade ready, Gautier reached and helped Miss Laura tuck up a lock of hair.

"This one is." Minna swelled with pride at his saying it right out in front of them all. "You ain't got no girl there," Jake said to the outlaw, very slowly. "That's the lady owns this place."

"That shocks me no end," Gautier said. "I am overcome with shame. So you're not her husband?"

"Overseer. You want that sleep?"

"You guard my slumbers, big boy. And don't go forgettin'—I sleep light."

Pel woke when the candles were spluttering. The shadows in the kitchen had all grown vast.

The kitchen was also full of snores. Jake, Gautier, and Minna were all snoring. Jake and Minna were together on the settle, and they looked closer now than they had when everyone first lay down. Jake's head was on her shoulder. Gautier lay on the

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settle dragged across the doorway. Miss Laura sat in the rocker, curled up, her feet off the ground under her skirt.

Pel rose and trod over to the settle. He trod like a cat. By the time he reached the settle, however, Gautier was watching.

"Where to, brat? I'm not escorting anyone to the lavatory."

"You can come with me, if you like, while I get you Tombstone's gun." Pel's words, like Gautier's, just grazed his lips.

The murderer's eyes flickered. "And while we're out, our brawny lad of an overseer belts down to the Hollow and brings men and hounds up here to beat the bushes." His gaze changed as he watched Pel's face. "Nothing personal. I'm sure you wouldn't rat. How come your ma brought you up so understanding of trapped things?"

"I ain't got no ma. Aunt Laura's the most marvellous lady in the whole world. She read about you and she said you was right to protect your kid brother from the man beating him up. You broke his head, didn't you?"

"Who's this Tombstone?" Gautier changed the subject.

"He's my best friend. He'd let you have the gun all right. He lets me have it sometimes. Don't tell no one. He teaches me to tickle fish and snare hares by their hindlegs."

"That sort of thing makes a might of blood for a kid to see," Gautier said on a sort of rasped low groan.

"It teaches me a lot," Pel answered. "Can I lay down by you, then?"

The day poked through a steady slash of rain. Now Jake made no bones about giving the orders, telling Gautier what he could take with him if he must.

"And I'm takin' this lady up the hill with me," Gautier said over the knife. "If any dogs and righteous farmers put in an appearance before I turn her loose—she gets it."

Minna could hardly keep the smile from twisting her mouth. Owner was rather a nominal title now, and if he'd taken the child as hostage or herself, he'd 've had some hold over them all . . .

At the knocks on the door, Gautier sprang to the wire screen. He vanished fast in the rain.

"O.K.," Minna said. "He's vamoosed. No more threats."

"Probably only Tombstone this time anyway." Jake opened the door. "Mr. Donald! I know what you've come about."

"Yes, the man Gautier's been seen near the Hollow," Donald said, stepping out of the downpour. "In last night's little squall he can't have had much fun on the run, but some barn may have had the honour of sheltering the fellow."

"We know where he was," Miss Laura began after a kind of

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hesitation, and the others stood back so she'd speak for them all.

"So do I," the farmer said grimly. "This morning I found old Rust."

"Your dog?"

"You know I couldn't think where he got to these last couple of days. Dear God. I wish I'd not found the beast, now. The poor brute's practically in pieces. It turned us up to find him. Faithful, affectionate old friend—never let a poacher go—he must have barked, or discovered Gautier in a bit of poaching, and that fiend thought he'd be a menace. I'd like to get him with one of his own famous knives."

It's my place to speak, Minna thought. The woman's speechless. "Farmer," she began, "don't go on in front of the boy, this ain't for a child's ears. Now quick—"

"I wish we knew where the man might be—" Miss Laura said in a strangled voice. Her face was chalky.

"Why—" Minna burst out contemptuously.

Jake's hand clamped down on her shoulder.

"Well, see you. Take care," the farmer said and swung out into the rain again. Pel sidled out after him, his curls a shimmer of gold even in that light, till the farmer put a fold of cloak over his head.

"I'll go after him, if you won't, you soft-livered ladies and gents—" Minna cried.

"Here—" Jake hauled her back.

"You hurt me," Minna said in amazement. "Where's the old woman run, out the back, now?"

"Don't talk of her like that," Jake said through gritted teeth, a muscle jumping in his jaw. "She's finer than a dozen of your sort all on parade could ever be."

"Jake! You always—that old—"

"Dunno if I hate her and her miserable place or love 'em. Anykick, they're both in the roots of me. She holds this place together, from falling apart, in the palm of her little lonely hand," Jake said, hardly audible.

Out under the steady rain the sweet william hissed and whispered. Miss Laura, her head down, was aware of the outlaw only when she bumped into him. Unable to stand, she trembled against him.

"These are tears, not rain on your cheeks," the man's deep voice said. "Come back under the eaves."

"I didn't know you were still here."

"I only ducked out of sight. I was on the roof, as it happened. I thought it best to be where no one would look, right with my pursuers."

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"Then you heard everything? I'm sorry."

"That you let me take the blame for the torture of the dog? Because I'm not responsible for that, you know—"

"I know. It's my nephew."

She leaned and sobbed, the sound indistinguishable from that of the rain. "For years, we've kept it our secret here on the old farm. I couldn't let Donald know. I had to let someone else take the blame—I was going to tell him you'd gone out here, though, till I realised I couldn't betray a man twice—"

"You're a lady, a rare lady, ma'am."

"He's a good little boy, a beautiful little boy."

"Yes, yes, I can see that, ma'am."

"You're only saying it. But he is. He just has these fits. Perhaps he needed parents. Ever since he was tiny—we'd find rabbits—kittens—"

"Hush, ma'am."

"You must be going. They'll be catching up with you."

The man's face, under its rain-black hair, was stilled. He was drawing her face in through his eyes.

"I'm glad to've met you, ma'am."

He bent and cradled her to him. His lips clung to hers as though she were strength and sweetness, sustenance for the desperate hunted loneliness ahead.

"So long, lady."

He loped off through the sibilant sweet william.

"Where to, youngster?" Farmer Donald said to the boy in the shelter of his rain-cape.

"I'm goin' down to see my Tombstone. Tombstone's my friend. Reckon I'll ask Tombstone to learn me to use a axe. Tombstone'll do anything I ask."

"That's no tool for a lad."

"Tombstone'll show me. Tombstone just don't like folks. But he sure likes me."

The sun came out. The rain thinned. The ridge-grass sparkled, and the birds experimented with a slight song in the trees.

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★ *Jane Gaskell produced her first novel, Strange Evil, when she was fourteen. She filled seven blue exercise books with vigorous prose and a year later held fame and a best-seller firmly in her hands. When she was seventeen, her Paris publishers held a party for her—and a thousand guests—and put her picture on all their book-matches. Now, at twenty-one, her third book, Attic Summer, has just been published.*

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WELSH ZERMATT

By E. L. MALPASS

LLANGRWL. The Welsh Zermatt," said the big poster on Dinas Junction Station.

Gazed at it round-eyed, did little Cadwallader Thomas. Then: "What is a Zermatt, Mam?" he inquired after cogitation.

"Damned if I know, Wally," said his mam. "But something foreign and nasty by the sound of it."

As a rival to Zermatt, Llangrwl had one serious disadvantage. On the rare occasions when there was enough weather to make winter sporting possible, you couldn't get within miles of the place. Snow clogged the roads like wet cottonwool. It blocked the single railway track. True, British Railways had furnished Eli the Locomotive with a shovel and orders to get through at all costs. But Eli was adamant. "Not tickling up my lumbago with that caper," he said. So he stayed in his cab and blew his whistle. And when that didn't clear the track he reversed his train into Dinas Junction, shouted, "All Change," and went home to bed. Not one to wrestle with the elements, that Eli.

Very discouraged, the members of the Llangrwl Tourist Board were. They gazed up at the gleaming white flanks of Llangrwl Mountain. All that wet, virgin snow, unmarked by a single ski track. In their mind's eye they saw a thousand would-be skiers, hurrying by road and rail from Birmingham and Manchester and Liverpool, their city-dulled eyes eager for those blinding peaks, only to be frustrated at the last ditch by a blocked road or the uncooperative Eli. As Evans the Chair-Lift bitterly remarked, either the place was full of visitors in ski-suits and woolly caps, listlessly playing with the pin-tables in the Arcade, or the damn snow was everywhere, and not a winter sporter in sight. For it was a law of nature that the snow always came two days after the last visitor had departed in dudgeon.

"Comes of living halfway up a blasted mountain," complained Griffiths the Sporting Requirements. "Health-giving the air may be indeed, but—"

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"What you want us to do, boy? Transport the village stone by stone and rebuild it in the valley?" That was Owen Mortimer, Chairman of the Board. Now he rose, wiped the steam from the window, and looked out. Snow was falling heavily. So was the barometer. Through the dancing flakes he could just discern the lower slopes of Llangrwl Mountain. They were smooth and white as sugar icing. He sighed. "Gentlemen, when this lot stops conditions will be ideal. Llangrwl will be a skier's paradise."

"And not a skier this side of Dinas," said Griffiths.

"Then we must bring them in," said Mortimer.

"How?" Very bitter, that Griffiths sounded. "Teams of huskies, is it?"

"I don't know," said Mortimer. "But bring them in we will. If the Almighty is good enough to provide the snow, the least we can do is to provide the visitors." But at that moment a messenger arrived, gave Mr. Mortimer a yellow envelope. He tore it open, read: ARRIVING FIFTY STRONG FRIDAY PLEASE ARRANGE ACCOMMODATION ALPINE CLUB DE WOLVERHAMPTON.

Today was Wednesday.

The snow went on falling. Gently, remorselessly, it funnelled into the deep cuttings on the Dinas-Llangrwl line. It drifted into the hollows on the roads, and where the roads ran high it jammed itself solid between the stone walls. Still it went on, blowing, drifting, cavorting, until the Llangrwl district was as helpless as a man under a wet sheet. Then, to finish off a good job, snowflake after snowflake went and sat on the telephone wires until they gave way in sheer desperation. By Friday morning Llangrwl, perched halfway up its mountain, was cut off from the world.

Well, there was a predicament for a winter sports centre. Especially with the fifty-strong Alpine Club eagerly en route. Llangrwl was in a ferment. At a shilling a go, Evans the Chair-Lift estimated, the Alpine Club was good for fifty pounds a week. Dr. Richards was busy turning the Cottage Hospital into a Casualty Clearing Station. The Rev. Roberts was organising a Saturday evening concert, the climax of which was to be a rendering of *Excelsior* by massed choirs. At the guest houses beds were being aired, tins of soup and baked beans marshalled, smiles of welcome rehearsed. The town had prepared for winter sports before; but never on this scale. Fifty, all at once! It was an invasion.

Or would have been, if the poor benighted Alpinists hadn't been stuck at Dinas Junction, fortifying themselves with tea

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and choc ices, the refreshment room's only contributions to gracious living.

But the Tourist Board were not taking things lying down. At their headquarters in Mount Tabor schoolroom they were in emergency session.

Owen Mortimer was at the blackboard. "Here is Llangrwl. Here is Dinas—and presumably the Alpine Club. This is the main road—blocked. This is the railway—also blocked. Now the problem is this. How to get the Alpinists from point A to point B?"

Very lucid, his explanation was. But baffling none the less to Willie the Milk, who was insufficiently blessed with imagination to see a connection between squiggles on a blackboard and the present exercise in logistics. Tugged at his black forelock, he did. "'Tis a lot farther than that to Dinas, Mr. Mortimer," he said, staring at the blackboard.

"Farther than what?" asked Mr. Mortimer.

Willie didn't quite know. But he was saved from answering this difficult question by Dr. Richards, who said, "If only Dinas would lend us their snowplough!"

Very wistful, everybody looked. Chapel-goers to a man, they knew well the dangers of coveting their neighbour's house, wife, ox, or ass. But there was nothing in the Commandments about snowploughs.

So they coveted.

The Dinas snowplough was indeed an impressive sight. In less rigorous seasons it was Price the Provisions' Travelling Ice Cream Van, adorned with pictures of overflowing cornets, and equipped with a stentorian musical-box that rendered the first few bars of *The Bells of Aberdovey* on weekdays and of *Why Do the Nations?* on the Sabbath. But on the very days in the year when ice cream sales would anyway be at their lowest, Price hired it out to the Urban District Council to push their shining blades through the white snow: a satisfactory arrangement for all concerned.

But that snowplough had never budged an inch outside the borders of the Dinas Urban District Council. You might drive comfortably along a road so far. But when you came to a wall of snow six feet high you knew that this was where Dinas ended and Llangrwl began.

"We could ask them, as a special favour," said Griffiths.

"But we can't. The wires are down."

Silence at that. Then: "Very fond of walking, Willie the Milk is," said Griffiths. "Take a message for us like a shot, Willie would."

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"You mean—walk to Dinas, in this?" asked Willie.

"You could come back on the snowplough, if they lent it us," Griffiths pointed out. "Playing those bells all the way. Be nice for you, that would, and you so musical."

Unconvinced, Willie was. "But it is ten miles. And very deep the snow is."

"Deep, yes. But deep and crisp and—" Griffiths groped for a word.

"Even?" suggested Evans the Chair-Lift.

"Even what?" asked Willie, nonplussed.

"What I mean," Griffiths explained kindly, "is that it would be a fine, health-giving walk on a morning like this. Bring the blood tingling to the cheeks. Wish I could go myself, by damn."

Evans said, "I propose that Willie be authorised to visit Dinas, and ask the Surveyor for the loan of their snowplough. If this is refused he should endeavour to persuade Eli to bring the train through, if necessary helping with the spadework himself."

"I second that motion," said Griffiths.

"Those in favour?" asked the Chairman. All hands shot up. All except Willie's. "Those against?" asked Owen. But Willie was still wrestling with the last point but one. "Carried nemine contradicente," said the Chairman. "Good-bye, Willie."

It was, as Griffiths had said, a beautiful morning for a walk. The sky had cleared now, and the peaks rose in jagged whiteness to the blue heaven. The Dinas road was a soft feather bed winding down into the valley. As invigorating as a cold bath, the air was. But Willie had no eye for this scenic grandeur. Worried to death, he was. In what passed for his mind was a jumble of blackboards, snowploughs, surveyors, and railway trains. Like pieces of a jigsaw, they were. But how they were supposed to fit together he just had no idea. He plodded on, up to the fetlocks in snow, bearing his awful burden of responsibility.

And then, suddenly, there was no more snow. He was walking on hard, metalled road. Here, the Dinas snowplough had been active. He had crossed the frontier.

Physically, of course, his way was now easier. But he went more and more slowly, knowing that every step brought him nearer to his interview with the dreaded Surveyor.

And now he had another problem, a problem of conscience. Before him, under its white icing, stood a lonely house. The Glendower Arms. Should he, or should he not, being on official business, wet his whistle?

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He decided that he should. The only trouble was that a large white van was parked so close to the inn door that he had quite a struggle to get past it. Damn near cut his leg on a great blade sticking out in front of the thing . . .

And it was at this moment that one of the jigsaw pieces in his brain fell into place.

The snowplough!

Before he, and much less anyone else, quite knew what was happening, he was in the driving-seat, pressing the starter, removing the handbrake, wiggling the gear lever. With a roar and a rattle, he was away. By the time the two employees of the Dinas Urban District Council got outside, their ale mugs in their hands, there was nothing but a flurry of powdery snow, and a white van cavorting into the distance.

" What the devil's that? " asked the Chairman of the Llangrwl Tourist Board, cocking an ear.

They listened. On the clear mountain air a sweet sound was borne. A distant pealing, that came ever nearer; the gentle, plaintive notes of *The Bells of Aberdovey.*

For a moment Owen Mortimer stood, with all his men, in dumb amaze. Then they ran to the window. Into the market place, flinging up a spume of white like a destroyer in heavy seas, came the Dinas snowplough. Behind it stretched a wide, clear furrow, the gateway to the outside world.

The Tourist Board cheered wildly. But there were tears in their eyes. It was Mafeking, all over again . . .

Ten minutes later, a bus from the deserted bus station was careering along the road to Dinas. It contained a Reception Committee and about fifty empty seats.

It drove straight to the railway station. But when the Reception Committee entered those dreary portals, their hearts sank. Of the gay, chattering throng they had hoped to find, there was no sign.

Completely deserted, the station was. The Llangrwl train stood at Platform 3, a pathetic sight, the windows of its two coaches filmed with ice. Its engine had gone off the boil long ago. Very evident to the Alpine Club it must have been that there would be no train to Llangrwl that day.

They went into the Refreshment Room. Empty, except for Mrs. Megan Thomas knitting behind the counter, and little Cadwallader staring at them balefully from behind a choc ice.

Very affable, Mr. Owen Mortimer was. " Good morning, ma'am. Six teas, if you please. With sugar."

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"No sugar," said Megan, operating the urn. She pushed six slopping cups over the counter. "Three bob."

"Thank you," said Mortimer. He smiled. "Been busy, is it?"

Megan went back to her knitting. Tried again, did Mortimer. "Looking for a party of winter sporters, we are. Thought they might be regaling themselves in here."

"Doesn't look like it, does it?" said Megan.

Mortimer turned to Cadwallader. "Now, my little man. Have you seen a lot of ladies and gentlemen in here?"

The ill-mannered child put out a choc-ice-coated tongue.

The Committee drank their sugarless tea and departed. Very hard is the lot of a Reception Committee looking vainly for someone to give a reception to. "What do we do now?" asked Griffiths the Sporting Requirements.

What, indeed? But it was at this bleak moment that Evans discovered an important clue in the railway posters. "Dinas, the Welsh Zermatt," he spelled out.

"Mr. Mortimer," he said.

"What is it, Evans?" Impatient, Mr. Mortimer sounded. Then his eyes followed his colleague's. He stared. He went closer.

A piece of paper bearing the word DINAS had been neatly pasted over the word LLANGRWL.

Well, there was deceitful for you. Very sorrowful, the Reception Committee felt, at such un-Welsh behaviour. But angry, too. "Pinched our Alpine Club, by damn," said Owen Mortimer. "Oh, suffer for this, they shall." As one man, they went to visit Price the Provisions, Chairman of the Urban District Council.

Very pleased to see them, Mr. Price was. Spread his hands on the counter and beamed. "This is indeed a pleasure," he said. "All too seldom we see our friends from Llangrwl, isn't it?"

Owen Mortimer also spread his hands on the counter, and pushed his face up close against Mr. Price's. "What have you done with the Alpine Club de Wolverhampton?" he demanded.

Hurt, Mr. Price looked. "Accusing me of mass kidnapping, is it?" he inquired, nasty.

"Yes," said Owen Mortimer.

Oh, very upset Mr. Price was at that. "Only a poor shopkeeper, me. What would I be wanting with an Alpine Club?"

"Maybe the police would know the answer to that. Very interested, too, they will be, to know who has been defacing our advertisements."

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Mr. Price shook his head. "Wouldn't go to the police, good boy. Too busy they are, today, trying to find my ice cream van."

"Indeed?" Very concerned, Mr. Mortimer sounded. "Lost that, have you?"

"Last seen disappearing towards Llangrwl, it was. Going to have very serious consequences for someone, I shouldn't wonder."

Regarded each other very thoughtful, Messrs. Price and Mortimer did. Clearly an impasse had been reached. The Reception Committee left the shop. In the fading light they glanced up at Dinas Mountain. Like ants on a white tablecloth, tiny figures were moving about those distant slopes. Some plodded up. Others soared down. It looked as though the Alpine Club de Wolverhampton had got what it came for.

"Right," said Owen Mortimer. "We will go and fetch them down." They hurried into the market place, and entered their bus. But at that moment two figures approached, and stood for a few seconds in earnest consultation. Then one of them mounted the bus steps. The Llangrwl party found themselves gazing once more into the anxious features of Price the Provisions.

"Have to ask you to move your bus, gentlemen," he said.

"Why?" As cold as the winter wind, Mr. Mortimer's tone was.

Price swallowed. "Inadvertently hemmed in Dai's bus, you have."

They looked round. It was quite true. Behind them was a second bus. They remained silent.

"If he comes forward he will ram you. If he reverses, run aground on the steps of the Ladies' Toilets, he will."

"Well, there is unfortunate," said Mr. Mortimer.

"A few inches would do it," pleaded Price.

"A bad night this for gallivanting in buses," said Mortimer. "Where would he be going, this Dai?"

"Just a little run."

"Nothing to do with the Alpine Club, I suppose?" Mr. Mortimer inquired, nasty.

"No, indeed. Going to fetch a—a party of schoolchildren from the cinema."

Settled himself more comfortably in his seat, did Mr. Mortimer. "Very pampered, the rising generation," he said. "Do them good to walk, the little dears . . ."

"Where's this damn bus?" asked Mr. Albert Smith, leader of the Alpine Club de Wolverhampton. "They said they'd be here to take us down at six sharp."

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" Starting to snow again, too," said a Mr. Raymond Brown. " Strewth, it's cold. I vote we start walking."

" Which way? " Mr. Smith asked icily.

It was a good question. All about them stretched the snowy waste. Not a star in the sky, not a light on the earth. Only the vicious little snowflakes, whirling about them like angry bees.

" Only a few inches," Price the Provisions said for the fifteenth time.

" Snowing again." Mr. Mortimer said. A thought struck him. " Should have expected those winter sporters to have been down from the hills by now."

" Enjoying themselves, no doubt," said Price indulgently. " Oblivious to the passing of time, isn't it."

" Very enjoyable indeed it must be, skiing in thick darkness and a raging blizzard," said Evans the Chair-Lift. " Reckon the passing of time is not the only thing they will be oblivious to, if they keep that up long."

Put a friendly hand on Mr. Price's knee, did Mortimer. " Don't wish to alarm you, Mr. Price. But—maybe a search party should be organised."

Evans the Chair-Lift leaned forward from the seat behind and put a kindly hand on Mr. Price's shoulder. " Unenviable in the extreme your position would be, as Chairman of the Council, if it got into the papers."

" If *what* got into the papers? " Blinked nervously, did Mr. Price.

" Winter Sporters in Disaster," headlined Griffiths the Sporting Requirements. " Frozen Corpses Found on Mountain."

" Why Was Rescue Not Attempted? " demanded Evans.

It was then that Owen Mortimer showed the fine metal he was made of. " Mr. Price," he said, " I have an idea. *We* will drive up there, in this bus, and rescue these unfortunate men. It is," he said—and there was a catch in his throat—" it is the duty of our common humanity."

" Never," cried Mr. Price. " Rather would I see the entire Alpine Club de Wolverhampton dead at my feet." Trembling with emotion, his voice was.

Well, there was uncooperative for you . . .

" Listen," said Albert Smith. " I thought I heard something."

" What? " asked the dejected Alpinists, crouched in the shelter of a stone wall.

" Bells," said Albert Smith.

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They listened. And there *were* bells. Very eerie they sounded, too, in that murky scene.

"Help," shouted the Alpinists. "Help." They watched and waited.

Incongruous, any vehicle would have looked on that barren hillside. But Father Christmas on his reindeer sled would not have seemed more unlikely than the sight that met their gaze.

There was a long moment of unbelief. It was Albert Smith who at last broke the silence.

"Well, would you believe it? Cornets and ruddy wafers," he whispered incredulously.

Left alone in Llangrwl, Willie the Milk knew just how that old Alexander used to feel. He, too, wanted new worlds to conquer. Flushed by his recent triumph he climbed once more into the borrowed snowplough. He thought of the high mountain tracks where he was wont to walk on Sunday afternoons. "Plenty of snow up there, I'll be bound," he muttered. He set off, Bells-of-Aberdoveying happily.

Far from home he was when darkness, and more snow, began falling. Then, above the tintinnabulation, he thought he heard a sound. He listened. Yes. There was no doubt about it. He steered in that direction.

Willie was not at all surprised to find a party of hikers waving and shouting for help. Wasn't the first time it had happened to him in the mountains. He pulled up. "Can you give us a lift to Dinas?" called the leader.

"Yes, indeed," said Willie, very obliging. They climbed aboard. A tight squeeze it was, too. And bitter cold. Ill-equipped for arctic conditions, those ice cream vans.

But after a few miles Willie stopped.

"What is it?" demanded the wretched Alpinists. "What's the matter now?"

"Lost, I am," Willie said simply.

Wrung their frozen hands, did the Alpinists.

Willie said, "I could retrace my steps to Llangrwl without difficulty, if that would be acceptable."

"Anywhere," they cried. "Anywhere that offers food and shelter."

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So Willie took his party of hikers back to Llangrwl, where they were received by a jubilant populace. Meanwhile, "The kiddies will have seen the picture round twice, isn't it," Mr. Mortimer was saying. But at that moment a familiar sound fell on their ears. Out like a shot went Mr. Price, closely followed by the Reception Committee.

"Good evening, Mr. Price," Willie said, very polite. "Found your snowplough up in the hills, I did. Brought it back hotfoot, thinking you might be worried."

"Oh, there is relieved I am," cried Mr. Mortimer. "Very perturbed I was for you, Mr. Price, losing such a valuable piece of equipment."

"Deserving a reward, Willie will be," said Griffiths hopefully.

Deaf to this kindly suggestion Mr. Price was, however. Too busy examining his van for scratches on the paintwork. But Willie whispered excitedly, "Rescued a party of hikers up on the mountains, Mr. Mortimer. Tucked up they are now in Llangrwl, snug as—"

"Hikers? How many were there?"

"About fifty of them," said Willie.

Mr. Mortimer hurried over to Price the Provisions. "Going we are, now, Mr. Price."

"Where to?" Suspicious-minded in the extreme, that provision merchant.

"Back to Llangrwl, of course. Good night, Mr. Price." He shook hands warmly. "Do not worry unduly. All may not be lost. Perhaps a few survivors will find their way down with the return of daylight."

They climbed into their bus and drove away. Looking back, they saw Dai and Mr. Price leap into their bus and go roaring away up the long road that led to Dinas Mountain.

Mr. Mortimer sighed. "I cannot escape the feeling," he said, "that Mr. Price was not altogether frank with us over this business."

"A terrible thing, deception," mused Griffiths. "And very distasteful to free and open natures like ours."

Remembered something, did Willie. "Wonder what happened to all those winter sporters," he said. "Gone back to England, maybe."

Looked at him very thoughtful, did Mr. Mortimer. "Maybe so, Willie," he said at last. "Maybe so." © E. L. Malpass 1963

Better the cold blast of winter than the hot breath of a pursuing elephant.

Chinese proverb

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world of snows

"One thought of fire in a world of snows."

She came in from the snowing air
Where icicle-hung architecture
Strung white fleece round the Baroque square.
I saw her face freeze in her fur,
Then my lips ran to her with fire
From the chimney corner of the room,
Where I had waited in my chair.
I kissed their heat against her skin
And watched the red make the white bloom,
While, at my care, her smiling eyes
Shone with the brilliance of the ice
Outside, whose dazzling they brought in.
That day, until this, I forgot.
How is it now I so remember
Who, when she came indoors, saw not
The passion of her white December?

STEPHEN SPENDER, *Ice*

Snow Lovers

Bob had gone before dinner to fetch her through the snowstorm from her home, which was only a quarter of a mile or so down the hill, and brought her up hanging on to his arm, their laughing faces wet with snow, her eyelashes sticking out in wet points above her wind-rosed cheeks . . . They were breathless and shouting with laughter, the snow stinging their faces . . .

Helen had been happy, hanging on to Bob's arm and drawing her breath in long gasps against the force of the wind, and loving the pure smell of the driving snow. She knew that this—the

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feel of Bob's warm, firm arm, the sound of his laughing voice coming down to her above the wind, the knowledge that they were alone together, fighting the storm side by side, was happiness. She knew that when she was an old woman, whatever happened between Bob and herself, she would remember such moments with the deepest tenderness that her heart had ever known.

STELLA GIBBONS, *My American*

Love on Ice

The last rose-petal of the sunset's rose
Falls in the further West and faintly glows,
One thought of fire in a world of snows . . .

She flies, I follow. Through the glimmering plain
We speed in silence. When I strive to gain
Her side, she holds me back. Wild hopes and vain!

She flies, I follow. Hear the dulcet chime
Of steel on ice that marks the magic time,
And breaks the rhythmic silence as with rhyme!

She trips, she falls. I hold her in a trice
And colder were her lips than Northern ice,
But warmer was my kiss than Southern skies.

E. B. OSBORN

Down on the rink all was gaiety and laughter. The lights shone ruby, emerald, and sapphire upon the darting figures. The undernote of the rushing skates made magic music everywhere. The whole scene was fantastic—a glittering fairyland of colour and enchantment . . . He held her caught to him.

She went with him, skimming the ice in time with his rhythmic movements, mesmerised into an enchanted quiescence.

ETHEL M. DELL, *Greatheart*

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I love the snow, the crumpling snow
That hangs on everything,
It covers everything below
Like white dove's brooding wing,
A landscape to the aching sight,
A vast expanse of dazzling light.

JOHN CLARE

Moonlit Snow

" 'Tis but some three short miles to Holywood direct; the bell hath not beat nine; the snow is pretty firm to walk upon, the moon clear; how if we went even as we are? "

" Agreed," cried Alicia, but Joanna only pressed upon Dick's arm.

Forth, then, they went, through open leafless groves and down snow-clad alleys, under the white face of the winter moon; Dick and Joanna walking hand in hand and in a heaven of pleasure . . . They gave up their hearts to the enjoyment of the hour, walking already as Alicia put it, in a wedding procession; and neither the rude solitude of the forest nor the cold of the freezing night had any force to shadow or distract their happiness.

At length from a rising hill they looked below them on the dell of Holywood. The great windows of the forest abbey shone with torch and candle; its high pinnacles and spires arose very clear and silent, and the gold rood upon the topmost summit glittered brightly in the moon.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, *The Black Arrow*

Blow, Northern Wind

Blow, northern wind; fall snow;
And thou—my loved and dear,
See, in this waste of burthened cloud
How Spring is near!

See, in those labouring boughs,
Buds stir in their dark sleep
How in the frost-becrumbling ruts
The green fires creep . . .

What Spring have we? Turn back! —
Though this be winter's end,
Still may far-memoried snowdrops bloom
For us, my friend.

WALTER DE LA MARE

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BRENDAN BEHAN:

Confirmation Suit

FOR weeks it was nothing but simony and sacrilege, and the sins crying to heaven for vengeance, the big green Catechism in our hands, walking home along the North Circular Road . . . The big fellows, who were now thirteen and the veterans of last year's Confirmation, frightened us, and said the Bishop would fire us out of the Chapel if we didn't answer his questions, and we'd be left wandering around the streets, in a new suit and top-coat with nothing to show for it, all dressed up and nowhere to go.

The big people said not to mind them; they were only getting it up for us, jealous because they were over their Confirmation, and could never make it again. At school we were in a special room to ourselves, for the last few days, and went round, a special class of people. There were worrying times too, that the Bishop would light on you, and you wouldn't be able to answer his questions. Or you might hear the women complaining about the price of boys' clothes.

" Twenty-two and sixpence for tweed, I'd expect a share in the shop for that. I've a good mind to let him go in jersey and pants for that."

" Quite right, ma'am," says one to another, backing one another up, " I always say what matter if they are good and pure."

What had that got to do with it, if you had to go into Chapel in a jersey and pants, and every other kid in a new suit, kid gloves and tan shoes and a scoil (school) cap. The Cowan brothers were terrified. They were twins, and twelve years old, and every old one in the street seemed to be wishing a jersey and pants on them, and saying their poor mother couldn't be expected to do for two in the one year, and she ought to go down to Sister Monica and tell her to put one back. If it came to that, the Cowans agreed to fight it out, at the back of the brewery wall, whoever got best, the other would be put back.

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I wasn't so worried about this. My old fellow was a tradesman, and made money most of the time. Besides, my grandmother, who lived at the top of the next house, was a lady of capernosity and function. She had money and lay in bed all day, drinking porter or malt, and taking pinches of snuff, and talking to the neighbours that would call up to tell her the news of the day. She only left her bed to go down one flight of stairs and visit the lady in the back drawing-room, Miss McCann.

Miss McCann worked a sewing-machine, making habits for the dead. Sometimes girls from our quarter got her to make dresses and costumes, but mostly she stuck to the habits. They were a steady line, she said, and you didn't have to be always buying patterns, for the fashions didn't change, not even from summer to winter. They were like a long brown shirt, and a hood attached, that was closed over the person's face before the coffin lid was screwn down. A sort of little banner hung out of one arm, made of the same material, and four silk rosettes in each corner, and in the middle, the letters I.H.S., which mean, Miss McCann said, " I Have Suffered."

My grandmother and Miss McCann liked me more than any other kid they knew. I like being liked, and could only admire their taste.

My Aunt Jack, who was my father's aunt as well as mine, sometimes came down from where she lived, up near the Basin, where the water came from before they started getting it from Wicklow. My Aunt Jack said it was much better water, at that. Miss McCann said she ought to be a good judge. For Aunt Jack was funny. She didn't drink porter or malt, or take snuff, and my father said she never thought much about men, either. She was also very strict about washing yourself very often. My grandmother took a bath every year, whether she was dirty or not, but she was in no way bigoted in the washing line in between times.

Aunt Jack made terrible raids on us now and again, to stop snuff and drink, and make my grandmother get up in the morning, and wash herself, and cook meals and take food with them. My grandmother was a gilder by trade, and served her time in one of the best shops in the city, and was getting a man's wages at sixteen. She liked stuff out of the pork butchers, and out of cans, but she didn't like boiling potatoes, for she said she was no skivvy, and the chip man was better at it. When she was left alone it was a pleasure to eat with her. She always had cans of lovely things and spicy meat and brawn, and plenty of seasoning, fresh out of the German man's shop up the road. But after a visit from Aunt Jack, she would have to get up and wash for a

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Brendan Behan describes himself as an author in Irish and English and enjoys a blistering command of the vocabularies of both. 'Educated by the French Sisters of Mercy, he was a member of the I.R.A., has a pathological dislike of policemen and a passionate belief in the underdog.

"I'm extraordinary," he says, "like everyone else. The real strength of a writer is that he realises that everyone is as extraordinary as he is."

week, and she would have to go and make stews and boil cabbage and pig's cheeks. Aunt Jack was very much up for sheep's heads too. They were so cheap and nourishing.

But my grandmother only tried it once. She had been a first-class gilder in Eustace Street, but never had anything to do with sheep's heads before. When she took it out of the pot, and laid it on the plate, she and I sat looking at it, in fear and trembling. It was bad enough going into the pot, but with the soup streaming from its eyes, and its big teeth clenched in a very bad temper, it would put the heart crossways in you.

My grandmother asked me, in a whisper, if I ever thought sheep could look so vindictive, but that it was more like the head of an old man, and would I for God's sake take it up and throw it out of the window. The sheep kept glaring at us, but I came the far side of it, and rushed over to the window and threw it out in a flash. My grandmother had to drink a Baby Power whiskey, for she wasn't the better of herself.

Afterwards she kept what she called her stock-pot on the gas. A heap of bones, and as she said herself, any old muck that would come in handy, to have boiling there, night and day, on a glimmer. She and I ate happily of cooked ham and California pineapple and sockeye salmon, and the pot of good nourishing soup was always on the gas even if Aunt Jack came down the chimney, like the Holy Souls at midnight. My grandmother said she didn't begrudge the money for the gas. Not when she remembered the looks that sheep's head was giving her. And all she had to do with the stock-pot was to throw in another sup of water, now and again, and a handful of old rubbish the pork butcher would send over, in the way of lights or bones.

My Aunt Jack thought a lot about barley, too, so we had a package of that lying beside the gas, and threw a sprinkle in any time her foot was heard on the stairs. The stock-pot bubbled away on the gas for years after, and only when my grandmother was dead did someone notice it. They tasted it, and spat it out just as quick, and wondered what it was. Some said it was paste, and more that it was gold size, and there were other people and they maintained that it was glue. They all agreed on one thing,

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that it was dangerous tack to leave lying around, where there might be young children, and in the heel of the reel, it went out the same window as the sheep's head.

Miss McCann told my grandmother not to mind Aunt Jack but to sleep as long as she liked in the morning. They came to an arrangement that Miss McCann would cover the landing and keep an eye out. She would call Aunt Jack in for a minute, and give the signal by banging the grate, letting on to poke the fire, and have a bit of a conversation with Aunt Jack about dresses and costumes, and hats and habits. One of these mornings, and Miss McCann delaying a fighting action, to give my grandmother time to hurl herself out of bed and into her clothes and give her face the rub of a towel, the chat between Miss McCann and Aunt Jack came to my Confirmation suit.

When I made my first Communion, my grandmother dug deep under the mattress, and myself and Aunt Jack were sent round expensive shops, and I came back with a rig that would take the sight of your eye. This time, however, Miss McCann said there wasn't much stirring in the habit line, on account of the mild winter, and she would be delighted to make the suit, if Aunt Jack would get the material. I nearly wept, for terror of what these old women would have me got up in, but I had to let on to be delighted, Miss McCann was so set on it. She asked Aunt Jack did she remember my father's Confirmation suit. He did. He said he would never forget it. They sent him out in a velvet suit, of plum colour, with a lace collar. My blood ran cold when he told me.

The stuff they got for my suit was blue serge, and that was not so bad. They got as far as the pants, and that passed off very civil. You can't do much to a boy's pants, one pair is like the next, though I had to ask them not to trouble themselves putting three little buttons on either side of the legs. The waistcoat was all right, and anyway the coat would cover it. But the coat itself, that was where Aughrim was lost.

The lapels were little wee things, like what you'd see in pictures like *Ring* magazine of John L. Sullivan, or Gentleman Jim, and the buttons were the size of saucers, or within the bawl of an ass of it, and I nearly cried when I saw them being put on, and ran down to my mother, and begged her to get me any sort of a suit, even a jersey and pants, than have me set up before the people in this get-up.

My mother said it was very kind of Aunt Jack and Miss McCann to go to all this trouble and expense, and I was very ungrateful not to appreciate it. My father said that Miss McCann was such

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a good tailor that people were dying to get into her creations, and her handiwork was to be found in all the best cemeteries. He laughed himself sick at this, and said if it was good enough for him to be sent down to North William Street in plum-coloured velvet and lace, I needn't be getting the needle over a couple of big buttons and little lapels. He asked me not to forget to get up early the morning of my Confirmation, and let him see me, before he went to work: a bit of a laugh started the day well. My mother told him to give over and let me alone, and said she was sure it would be a lovely suit, and that Aunt Jack would never buy poor material, but stuff that would last for ever.

That nearly finished me altogether, and I ran through the hall up to the corner, fit to cry my eyes out, only I wasn't much of a hand at crying. I went more for cursing, and I cursed all belonging to me, and was hard at it on my father, and wondering why his lace collar hadn't choked him, when I remembered that it was a sin to go on like that, and I going up for Confirmation, and I had to simmer down, and live in fear of the day I'd put on that jacket.

The days passed, and I was fitted and refitted, and every old one in the house came up to look at the suit, and took a pinch of snuff, and a sup out of the jug, and wished me long life and the health to wear and tear it, and they spent that much time viewing it round, back, belly and sides, that Miss McCann hadn't time to make the overcoat, and like an answer to a prayer, I was brought down to Talbot Street, and dressed out in a dinging overcoat, belted, like a grown-up man's. And my shoes and gloves were dear and dandy, and I said to myself that there was no need to let anyone see the suit with its little lapels and big buttons. I could keep the topcoat on all day, in the chapel, and going round afterwards.

The night before Confirmation day, Miss McCann handed over the suit to my mother, and kissed me, and said not to bother thanking her. She would do more than that for me, and she and my grandmother cried and had a drink on the strength of my having grown to be a big fellow, in the space of twelve years, which they didn't seem to consider a great deal of time. My father said to my mother, and I getting bathed before the fire, that since I was born Miss McCann thought the world of me. When my mother was in hospital, she took me into her place till my mother came out, and it near broke her heart to give me back.

In the morning I got up, and Mrs. Rooney in the next room shouted in to my mother that her Liam was still stalling, and not making any move to get out of it, and she thought she was cursed;

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Christmas or Easter, Communion or Confirmation, it would drive a body into Riddleys, which is the mad part of Grangegorman, and she wondered she wasn't driven out of her mind, and above in the puzzle factory years ago. So she shouted again at Liam to get up, and washed and dressed. And my mother shouted at me, though I was already knotting my tie, but you might as well be out of the world, as out of fashion, and they kept it up like a pair of mad women, until at last Liam and I were ready and he came in to show my mother his clothes.

She hanselled him a tanner, which he put in his pocket and Mrs. Rooney called me in to show her my clothes. I just stood at her door, and didn't open my coat, but just grabbed the sixpence out of her hand, and ran up the stairs like the hammers of hell. She shouted at me to hold on a minute, she hadn't seen my suit, but I muttered something about it not being lucky to keep a Bishop waiting, and ran on.

The Church was crowded, boys on one side and the girls on the other, and the altar ablaze with lights and flowers, and a throne for the Bishop to sit on when he wasn't confirming. There was a cheering crowd outside, drums rolled, trumpeters from Jim Larkin's band sounded the Salute. The Bishop came in and the doors were shut. In short order I joined the queue to the rails, knelt and was whispered over, and touched on the cheek. I had my overcoat on the whole time, though it was warm, and I was in a lather of sweat waiting for the hymns and the sermon.

The lights grew brighter and I got warmer, was carried out fainting. But though I didn't mind them loosening my tie, I clenched firmly my overcoat, and nobody saw the jacket with the big buttons and the little lapels. When I went home, I got into bed, and my father said I went into a sickness just as the Bishop was giving us the pledge. He said this was a master stroke, and showed real presence of mind.

Sunday after Sunday, my mother fought over the suit. She said I was a liar and a hypocrite, putting it on for a few minutes every week, and running into Miss McCann's and out again, letting her think I wore it every weekend.

In a passionate temper my mother said she would show me up, and tell Miss McCann, and up like a shot with her, for my mother was always slim, and light on her feet as a feather, and in next door. When she came back she said nothing, but sat at the fire looking into it.

I didn't really believe she would tell Miss McCann. And I put on the suit and thought I would go in and tell her I was wearing it this week-night, because I was going to the Queen's with my

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brothers. I ran next door and upstairs, and every step was more certain and easy that my mother hadn't told her. I ran, shoved in the door, saying, " Miss Mc., Miss Mc., Rory and Sean and I are going to the Queen's . . . "

She was bent over the sewing-machine and all I could see was the top of her old grey head, and the rest of her shaking with crying, and her arms folded under her head, on a bit of habit where she had been finishing the I.H.S. I ran down the stairs and back into our place, and my mother was sitting at the fire, sad and sorry, but saying nothing.

I needn't have worried about the suit lasting for ever. Miss McCann didn't. The next winter was not so mild, and she was whipped before the year was out. At her wake people said how she was in a habit of her own making, and my father said she would look queer in anything else, seeing as she supplied the dead of the whole quarter for forty years, without one complaint from a customer.

At the funeral, I left my topcoat in the carriage and got out and walked in the spills of rain after her coffin. People said I would get my end, but I went on till we reached the graveside, and I stood in my Confirmation suit drenched to the skin. I thought this was the least I could do.

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" One day, my son, this coffee table will be yours."

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The Telegram

By DARRELL BATES

OH, bother!" said the Colonel.

We were in a circle round him drinking and smoking and talking to our neighbours. It was the mildness of the Colonel's words and the quietness of his voice that shocked us into silence. Whatever we were saying died on our lips, our gestures faded away, and we all turned inwards to face him with a sheepish, distantly-remembered military cohesion.

"Oh, damn!"

He still spoke softly, but the damn at least was more healthy than the "bother." We relaxed a little but much of our anxiety and our curiosity remained.

"What a bloody shame!"

We relaxed a muscle more. The Colonel was becoming more like his natural self.

"What's the matter, Colonel?" Thompson asked.

Colonel Chene had been a slight, wiry man when we knew him during the war but twenty years of time and ten years of retirement in Budleigh Salterton had left him desiccated and frail. We had feared and liked him then. Now we felt protective towards him, like parents of a backward child.

"It's this!" he said, holding up the telegram. "Garvey can't come."

The murmurs and exclamations of regret were much more for the Colonel than for Garvey. Garvey had been a good chap but he could always look after himself. What worried us was the disappointment of the Colonel. He had, we knew, been plotting and arranging and cajoling for over two years to get us together for this dinner. We were scattered over three continents and it had been quite an achievement on his part.

"What a shame!" we chorused. "What a shame! What is the trouble?"

"He's had an accident."

We leaned inwards, like witches over a cauldron, and read the telegram. REGRET CAN'T COME OWING SLIGHT ACCIDENT GARVEY.

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"What bad luck!" We were still thinking of the Colonel. Peters had come all the way from Paris for this dinner, and Whitehaven from the Channel Islands. The date I knew had been carefully arranged to fit our various movements like a jigsaw puzzle. I had arrived the day before from Africa, and Hughes was leaving later that night on a plane to New York. It was, as I have said, quite an achievement to have got us all together.

And now, at the last minute, Garvey couldn't come. We all looked at the Colonel, anxiously watching how he would take it. He had we knew been particularly attached to Robert Garvey.

"Well, never mind," he said. He spoke to one of the waiters and they started to rearrange the places at the circular table. The Colonel had taken a private room at a very good, very old-fashioned hotel for his reunion party.

We all breathed sighs of relief. For all his frailty the Colonel could still face facts we saw, and his courage was unimpaired.

We had another round of sherry and soon afterwards we sat down to dinner. The time I happened to notice was half past eight. The dinner had been fixed for eight fifteen and we were all glad to see that in his old age the Colonel wasn't so exactly fussy, as he used to be, about the time.

"Well," he said. "This is nice. Bit different from the last time, what?"

The last time had been at a trestle table nine thousand feet above sea level. In the distance on the other side of the valley were the remnants of the Italian lines, scattered and sour like the remains of yesterday's lunch. A thin moon raced behind misty clouds, and it was very cold. We sat in our sweaters and

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greatcoats and ate stew on tin plates, but in our glasses there was a white sparkling wine which we had looted that afternoon from the enemy lines. The battle was over and we were celebrating. It was in Abyssinia in the November of 1942.

Suddenly the Colonel had banged his knife on the wooden table.

" In twenty years' time, if I'm still alive, we'll do this again. We'll have dinner in London. On me. What do you say? "

" Jolly good idea, sir," Garvey had said at once. And the rest of us of course had said or thought the same. But none of us I think ever expected that it would ever really be.

And yet here we were. There had been eight of us that night round the trestle table in the hills above Gondar. The five company commanders, and the second-in-command, and I, because I was the adjutant. And the Colonel of course. Only the second-in-command was absent now, and he was dead. And Garvey . . .

" Do you remember," Thompson said, " how you said then that you hoped that when we had this dinner it would be a nice, lovely pea-souper fog? "

" Yes," said the Colonel. " I remember."

" Ha! Ha! Ha! " we all cried. The fog outside was like a yellow blanket, damp and dirty, and sweet to the taste of those like myself whose lives had been spent under hard clear alien skies and endless mortifying sun.

" Garvey always used to say . . ." The Colonel's voice tailed off, and he looked down at his plate. There was a short, awkward silence. Again, for some reason or other, my eye caught the old gilt clock on the mantelpiece. I saw that it was a quarter past nine.

Suddenly the door of the room swung open. And a man walked in.

" Hullo, Colonel," he said. " Hullo, chaps."

Garvey had hardly changed at all. He came into the room, his big shoulders hunched, his hair dark and unruly, his hands full of gestures.

The only thing that was different was that this time he was as drunk as a lord.

The waiters had laid a place for him again and we had moved up to make room. Garvey had waved the soup and the fish aside and was eating the partridge with the rest of us. He drained his glass of wine in one quick gulp.

" Sorry I'm late, Colonel," he said. " It's this bloody fog."

The Colonel nodded He didn't say anything. I was sitting

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next to him. I could see a vein pulsing near his eye. He suddenly looked a very old man.

The party gradually slid downhill. We all tried to shore it up with do-you-remembers and how's-old-so-and-sos and the occasional dirty story. The Colonel had always liked stories about loose women and queers and honeymoons, provided they weren't too rough. He smiled with his mouth now, but not with his eyes, the whole face wrinkling as it used to do.

Garvey talked the whole time. He always was a good talker but gradually as he piled the Pelion of the dinner's wine on the Ossa of whatever he had drunk before he got incoherent and slurred. Several times he slumped in his chair and once he slipped off it on to the floor. Now suddenly he stood up.

"I want to drink a toast."

"Sit down," his neighbours said. "For heaven's sake, shut up." We had agreed that Thompson who had been the senior company commander should make the speech.

But Garvey went on, and on and on. For a man who was drunk it wasn't a bad speech. In between long irrelevant asides he managed to say all the things that we wished should be said, and in one extraordinary paragraph of jumbled words and metaphors he recaptured for us all the atmosphere of that meal at a trestle table twenty years ago in the highlands of Ethiopia.

The Colonel listened with a set white face. When it was over he got up and said a few perfunctory words. We felt very very sad for him.

"Are you staying in town, Colonel," I asked, "or do you have to catch a train?"

"I'm staying at the Langham."

No one said anything about Garvey. And it wasn't until we had said good night to the Colonel, and thank you and the best of luck that I realised that in all his flood of words Garvey hadn't said a thing about the telegram . . .

"I think," I said to the others at the hotel door, "I'd better take Garvey home." Garvey had slipped on the stairs, and two of us had more or less carried him down. Most of the others I knew were married, or had to catch a train.

"Yes," they said. "Perhaps it would be a good idea."

"Where do you live, Robert?" I asked.

"In hell, old boy," he said. "In hell."

He spoke the words quietly, and his face suddenly was set and serious.

"Does anybody know where he lives?" I asked.

"Yes," said Palmer. "He lives in Campden Hill Square." He told me the number.

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"Is he married?" I hadn't seen Garvey since the war.

"No. He's a bachelor."

We put him in a taxi. I told the driver where to go, and then I got in too.

Garvey was asleep when we reached Campden Hill Square. The taxi-driver and I carried him up the stairs and put him on a settee in his sitting-room. His name was on a card outside the door, and I found the keys in the pocket of his trousers. I gave the taxi-driver a pound.

"Can I take you anywhere?" he asked.

I said no, I would walk. When he had gone I opened the door with Garvey's key which I had kept and went back up into his room. He was still asleep. Quietly and deeply asleep. I wondered what it was exactly that he had been drinking before the party.

I had known Robert Garvey quite well for a year or two during the war. He was a rough, tough character, full of uncomplicated vices and handsome in a saturnine kind of way. He had been farming in Kenya before the war, not doing very well. I heard later that he had left Kenya after some sort of scandal in which women, horses, and hotels, in roughly equal quantities, had played their part. At the dinner Thompson had told me that Garvey had recently come into some money from an aunt.

I wandered round the room and helped myself to a drink. It was a beautiful room with a long window overlooking the square. On a table were a daily paper, a couple of illustrated magazines and, rather surprisingly I thought from what I remembered of Garvey, two highbrow literary reviews. The books were curious too. The P. G. Wodehouse and Forester and the long American novels about sex I had expected. Iris Murdoch and C. P. Snow he might have read too, just to be in the swim, but I could not understand why Baudelaire was there and Lorca and a well-thumbed Descartes. It was a schizophrenic sort of room, and I wondered if there was more perhaps to Robert Garvey than I knew.

I looked at him again. He was still sound asleep and he was beginning to snore. I decided that it was time I put him to bed.

There was a door in the wall of the sitting-room. I opened it and switched on the light.

In the middle of the room there was a broad divan bed, with a scarlet counterpane. And stretched out on it was a girl with nothing on.

She sat up as soon as I turned on the light. She looked at me steadily as the sleep seeped out of her eyes.

"Who are you?"

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There was no fear or remorse in her voice at all.

" I've brought Robert home," I said.

She didn't say anything for some time; or make any movement.

" I'm his sister," she said, tilting her head in a defiant loyal gesture. There was something familiar in that gesture, but I couldn't think what it was. She rolled over and wrapped the counterpane round her and stood up.

" Where is he? "

I went back into the sitting-room.

" I was going to put him to bed."

" I'll give you a hand." She had tucked the counterpane under her arms and secured it tightly round her. She was a very pretty girl. She didn't ask if Robert was drunk or comment on his condition in any way at all.

When we had put him on the bed I walked to the door.

" Don't go for a moment." She was kneeling beside the bed, taking off his coat.

" All right," I said. " I'll wait in here." I heard her get up and go to the door and shut it.

I helped myself to another drink. I went over to the bookshelves, and drew out the copy of *Les Fleurs du mal*. I looked at the flyleaf. Then I took out the Descartes too, just to be sure.

How very odd, I thought.

" Would you like some coffee? "

I looked at my watch. It was half past twelve.

" Yes," I said. " I would."

" It was kind of you to bring him home," she said later when she had poured the coffee. She had put on a housecoat buttoned to the neck. It was the same colour as the counterpane, and she still looked very pretty. She was also perfectly composed.

" You're quite sober," she said. She looked with cool deliberation first at my face and then my hands. Her voice held a note of accusation.

" Yes. We didn't have much to drink. Robert must have been drinking before."

" No," she said. " He wasn't."

It was my turn now to look at her. I looked at her face, and at her hands, and at her bare feet.

" No," she said again. " He drinks very little now. He's almost given it up."

" You're a very loyal sister," I said. I was playing for time. Time to digest what she had said and to try to work out what her motives were.

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"No," she said. "I'm not."

"Neither loyal then, nor," I added, "a sister."

She got up and went to the window and opened the curtains and looked out at the square.

"How did you know?" She was still looking out of the window.

"Did you know what Robert was doing tonight?" I thought it was my turn to ask a question.

"No," she said at once. "He didn't tell me and I didn't ask. I'm not his wife." She had turned from the window and was looking at me again. "I just live with him."

"Does your father know?" I asked.

"I don't think so. In fact I'm sure he doesn't. If he did he would have blown me up long ago."

"Yes," I said. "I know him too."

"You know him? How?"

"In the same way as Robert. We were together in the war with the Colonel."

"Oh. I see." She poured out some more coffee. "How did you know I was his daughter? Did someone tell you?"

I went over to the bookshelf, took out *Les Fleurs du mal,* and opened out the flyleaf.

"I see." She sat down. "Why are you playing the detective?"

"We both had dinner with the Colonel tonight," I said.

"Oh, God!" She put her face in her hands.

"I'm not being curious," I said. "I'm trying to help." I told her about the dinner, and the telegram, and when Robert had arrived and in what condition. I asked her if she had sent the telegram but I knew already that she hadn't.

"Was Robert all right when he left here?" I asked. "Had he had much to drink?"

"No. We had a glass of sherry, that's all. He had stopped drinking, as I told you, almost, since . . ."

"Since you came to live with him?"

"Yes."

"I like you," I said. "I think you are very nice."

"Thank you." She helped herself to a cigarette.

I sat thinking. The whole thing was very odd, but I couldn't think what the answer was. I got up.

"It's time I went. Thank you for the coffee, ma'am."

"Thank you," she said, "for helping. Shall I get a taxi for you?"

"At this time of night?"

"We have the number of a taxi-rank." She stood up.

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"Don't you bother," I said.

I went over to the telephone, and she told me what number to ring.

While I dialled my eye caught a note on a pad of paper beside the telephone. *Langham* 7.15, it said. My finger stopped and I let the number swing back to its starting point.

"What time did Robert go out this evening?" I asked.

"At about half past five. Why?"

I suddenly felt very tired.

"I'll give you a ring in the morning," I said. "What time do you think will Robert be taking telephone calls?"

She smiled. "It would be safer I think if you came to lunch."

"Yes," said Robert, "it was rather a surprise. I got a letter from the Colonel yesterday morning from Budleigh Salterton. He asked me to ring him up at the Langham in the afternoon. When I rang he asked me to meet him there at a quarter past seven. 'We'll go on to the dinner afterwards,' he said.

"I didn't tell you either about the dinner or the letter," he added, turning to the girl, "because I thought you would worry . . ."

"What did you do, Robert," I asked, "between half past five and seven fifteen? Just as a matter of interest."

Robert looked at me for some time before he replied. Then he looked at the girl and shrugged his shoulders. "I had a drink," he said. "In fact I had several drinks."

"Why?" The girl's voice was off-key with sadness, and compassion.

"Because," he said, "I had a pretty good idea why the Colonel wanted to see me. And I didn't like it much . . ."

"What happened," I asked, "when you got to the Langham?"

"We had a drink. He was very pleasant and all that . . . only I noticed that old vein pulsing away by his eye. Do you remember?

"Suddenly," Garvey went on, "he put his glass down.

"'Robert,' he said to me. 'I've heard things about my daughter. Are they true?'"

The Colonel was never one to beat about the bush.

"I didn't say anything. I didn't know how much he knew.

"'Will you give me your word of honour, Garvey,' the Colonel said, 'that you won't see my daughter again.'

"'No,' I said. 'I won't.'

"'You bastard!'

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"We sat there in our chairs in the hotel lounge for several long minutes. Neither said anything, but gradually I saw the pulsing of the vein on the Colonel's face had eased and died away. But it was still some time before he spoke.

"'Sorry,' he said. 'I shouldn't have said that.' He got up. 'I'll get you another drink.'

"'No,' I said, 'you won't. What's more I won't come to your damn dinner-party either. And for all I care you can tell them why.'

"The Colonel just sat there," Robert went on, "looking like hell. I knew how hard he had worked to get us together for the dinner and how important it was to him that we should all be there. I was angry and I wanted to hurt him, all the more so, of course, as I knew that I—" he looked at the girl—"and I alone, was to blame.

"Suddenly the Colonel stood up. He had too much pride and too much courage to try and persuade me to change my mind. Just as he had had too much pride and too much courage to put off talking to me about his daughter even if it might mean busting up his dinner. He turned on his heel and left without another word.

"I had another drink after that. And another . . . At about nine o'clock—" Robert shrugged his large shoulders—"I decided to go to the dinner after all."

"How much do you remember after that?" I asked.

"All I remember is when I arrived at the party and said hullo to the Colonel and the rest of you. I felt very dry mouthed. I remember drinking a glass of wine, and after that I don't remember anything. Anything at all until I woke up this morning."

"How very odd," I said. "Then you didn't send that telegram?"

"What telegram?"

I looked at the girl. I thought she would have told him. She shook her head. "I thought I'd better leave that to you," her eyes said.

For some time, after I had explained about the telegram and the Colonel's reaction to it, we sat sipping our drinks, each thinking our own thoughts.

"Do you know," I said in the end, "I never knew the Colonel was married. He always spoke as if he was a bachelor."

"He was," his daughter said at once. "That's what he was, in effect. You see," she went on, "he married a French girl. Soon after I was born she ran away with another man. She took me with her and I was brought up in France. I didn't see him again

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until my mother died and I came to England three years ago."

"I see," I said. There was another long silence.

"So," she went on, looking at Robert, "he sent the telegram himself . . . to explain your absence."

"Poor old boy!" Robert's voice was very quiet.

I drank off the rest of my drink in a single gulp.

"Now it's your turn, I think," I said, looking at Robert, "to send him a telegram."

They looked at one another. I helped myself to another drink to warm the coldness in my armpits. I got up and walked to the window overlooking the square.

"All right," Robert said in the end, "we will."

"But only on condition," the girl added, "that you'll come to the wedding too . . ."

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AS GOOD FISH IN THE SEA . . .

The excitement of a holiday and the madness of a heat wave hung in the air. The stone flags of the water's edge, where Joan and Xan Fielding and I sat down to dinner, flung back the heat like a casserole with the lid off.

On a sudden, silent decision we stepped down fully dressed into the sea carrying the iron table a few yards out and then our three chairs, on which, up to our waists in cool water, we sat round the neatly laid table-top, which now seemed by magic to be levitated three inches above the water.

The waiter, arriving a moment later, gazed with surprise at the empty space on the quay; then, observing us with a quickly-masked flicker of pleasure, he stepped unhesitatingly into the sea, advanced waist deep with a butler's gravity, and, saying nothing more than "Dinner-time," placed our meal before us—three beautifully grilled kephali, piping hot, and with their golden brown scales sparkling. To enjoy their marine flavour to the utmost, we dipped each by its tail for a second into the sea at our elbow . . .

Diverted by this spectacle, the diners on the quay sent us can upon can of retsina till the table was crowded. A dozen boats soon gathered there, the craft radiating from the table's circumference like the petals of a marguerite. Leaning from their gently rocking boats, the fishermen helped us out with this sudden flux of wine, and by the time the moon and the Dog-Star rose over this odd symposium, a mandoline had appeared and manga songs in praise of hashish rose into the swooning night.

PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR, *Mani*.

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Operation Pushkin

BY GERALD SPARROW

THIS is a story about a man, a revolution, and a dog. It is true and happened to me recently. I will tell it to you exactly as it occurred, with no fancy trimmings at all.

It's a short journey by air from Istanbul to Beirut, but the two cities, though both Moslem, live in different worlds. The Turks in Istanbul are grave and dignified, remembering their past glory perhaps. There is none of your Turkish decorum in Beirut. As soon as the Viscount touched down on the tarmac, I sensed the change. Here was a gay trollop of a city where the Lebanese ran the Government—but the French still ran the nightclubs. Here money could buy anything, a Cadillac, a girl, a Minister, a murder. This was the indigenous East with Arab witchery and French charm. I loved it.

My spirits rose in the warm semi-tropical afternoon when I caught sight of the snow mountains that seem to rise around the city like a giant screen painted by a master with a passion for contrast.

Twenty minutes later I was in the British Embassy talking, to my surprise, to a young, very alert British official.

"So you're only staying here the night—leaving for Baghdad in the morning? Is it necessary for you to fly into Baghdad just now? The political trials are at their height. A young British engineer was torn to pieces in the streets by the mob last week."

"I promised my publisher to do some business for him there."

"I see. Have you any introductions?"

"Yes. I have letters to a member of the Prime Minister's staff; to the Director of Military Intelligence; and to the Director of Radio and Information."

The official seemed surprised, but made no comment.

"Well, we shall be glad to see you when you get back—take care that you do get back."

I walked the hundred yards to the City Hotel, which is as

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modern as a good French architect could make it, an apartment hotel, which meant that I had a sitting-room with divan beds, a bathroom, and a kitchenette. I could have gone into the market and cooked myself a supper, but for one night it did not seem worthwhile. After a bath I decided to visit the bar on the ground floor and then, refreshed, the roof restaurant.

I was too early, of course. In Beirut one dines at nine or ten or even eleven. Here was I, incurably British, at seven thirty demanding a whisky and soda, and then my dinner. The bar was empty except for Philippe the barman and a girl sitting on a stool drinking what appeared to be orange juice.

Philippe was charming. He had French manners but Arab eyes. He spoke in French.

"It is your first visit, monsieur?"

I nodded.

"Ah. I hope you will not be bored. May I show you a little trick to while away the time?"

"Please do."

Philippe's trick was diverting. He did it all with a cheese straw, a little twisted piece of paper, a drop of Cointreau. Deftly he twisted the paper into the shape of a girl. There she was—arms, legs, she even had breasts and a minute, sleek head. Everything she required. Philippe dropped a little Cointreau on to his creation.

"Lucy on the sand," he said, "making love by the sea." And, sure enough, the little figure started to vibrate.

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" She is loved," said the girl on the stool.

I finished my whisky and excused myself. One could not leave without ceremony.

Philippe smiled. " Au revoir, monsieur."

It was the roof restaurant on the sixth floor of the City Hotel with a magnificent view of the sea, the city, and the mountains that led to Operation Pushkin, the oddest and in some respects the most terrifying adventure of my not uneventful life.

At the roof restaurant they served French and Chinese food, at first a surprising choice, yet on reflection a good one. These are the cuisine of the two races who take cooking seriously, who treat it as the art of gratifying all the senses. But there was a special reason why the restaurant had a French and Chinese menu. It was Monsieur Corot. Anatole Corot was a slim delicate man of forty-eight. He has lived twenty years in Shanghai, but is still as French as the Champs-Elysées. During the war he served with the French Forces attached to the R.A.F. He wore in his buttonhole the unmistakable little red ribbon of the Légion d'honneur.

Monsieur Corot was but starting this restaurant, you will understand. He greeted me at the doorway with a welcoming smile.

What I really wanted to order was a simple filet mignon and half a bottle of Lebanese red wine, but Monsieur Corot had other ideas. Learning that I too had lived in the Far East, he insisted on my sampling his Chinese cooking. " Tell me," he said, " anything that is not perfect. I will greatly appreciate it."

After a suitable interval, when I drank a dry sherry with Monsieur Corot, I found myself eating noodle soup and a very young chicken decorated with green eggs, accompanied by " barmi " and hot Chinese tea.

Monsieur Corot, who had the kind of manners one might have expected to find at the court of Louis Quinze, waited with apparent apprehension for the verdict.

" It is truly delicious, monsieur—but have you not forgotten the sweet and sour sauce ? " Monsieur Corot's face clouded for a moment. He had forgotten. It would be remedied instantly.

Other guests started to arrive. A charming, elegant, and elderly French couple. A party of eight Japanese headed by the Japanese Consul-General. A young Frenchman and a girl in love. Monsieur Corot attended to them all, then he returned to my table. I asked him to be seated. We ordered a brandy.

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" You are venturing to Baghdad tomorrow, monsieur ? "

" Yes, I have to go, but I have some resounding introductions to General Qasim's men . . ."

Monsieur Corot thought for a moment. Then he spoke, now in faultless English.

" Sir," he said, " I am but a stranger to you. I feel that I have no right to ask your help. Yet I will do so. I was in Baghdad at the time of the revolution, employed as an accountant in the Development Board. When the fury of the mob was let loose on the morning of 14th July I barely escaped with my life. As you see, my left arm was smashed beyond repair."

I noticed now for the first time that that arm hung limply.

" In the desperation of the moment, I left without my dog, Pushkin, who is my friend. She is with a Monsieur and Madame Gravand." Monsieur Corot sighed. "I do not know if they are still at liberty, for the new régime appears to hate France. But I have their address—their last address. I wonder if it would be possible that you might bring my dog back to me? "

I looked at Monsieur Corot. He was standing now with that air he had of being a courtier in more regal days, his dark face intent, expectant, his remarkably fine and large brown eyes expressing the resignation and the sorrow that a Frenchman of forty-eight may find habitual to him in an unromantic world.

I looked at Monsieur Corot's little ribbon and found myself saying, " But of course I will try to bring Pushkin back to you. It will be a pleasure."

Monsieur Corot said, " Thank you."

He never seemed to doubt that I would recover Pushkin. Although he did not know if Pushkin still lived; although his friends might well be festering in a Iraqui gaol; although Monsieur Corot himself, it was clear, was in the worst political odour in Baghdad, yet I would bring back his dog. You see—and I hardly dare write this—he had been promised it by an Englishman.

He produced from his pocket Pushkin's " passport." It was her vaccination certificate, without which she would not be admitted into the Lebanon. I read the torn document with interest.

Je soussigné, Docteur Haroun Joseph, Vétérinaire au Ministre de l'Agriculture certifie . . .

Then followed this description of Pushkin:

RACE: Commune.
SEXE: Femelle.
AGE: Cinq mois.
ROBE: Marron foncé.
NOM DE PROPRIETAIRE: Anatole Corot.

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The certificate which followed was dated the 26th February 1958 and was for three years.

"I should keep this?"

"Please." Monsieur Corot added, "I have a great affection for this little mongrel. When you see her, you will understand."

I shall never forget the plane journey I made the next day. To my surprise, Monsieur Corot came to see me off. He had bought all the English newspapers and magazines in Beirut for me to read. It was the most comfortable short air passage I ever made. The pilot was superb. He took off from the Beirut airstrip imperceptibly. In the morning sunshine at 26,000 feet the four giant Rolls-Royce engines gleamed and sparkled. The pilot landed on the Baghdad runway holding the first contact as firmly as a Bedouin holds his gun.

During that journey I looked again at my introductions to the revolutionary leaders. They were all in Arabic, written from right to left. I knew that they would assure me useful official contacts, but what use they would be, if any, with the street mob that now terrorised the population I had no idea.

Baghdad! The plane was gliding down now over the green fertile valley of the Euphrates which we could see beneath us winding its way like a brown slug through the warm wet landscape.

This was it. As I came down the gangway and walked with the other passengers to the incoming-passenger building, again I sensed a sharp sudden change in the atmosphere from that of sophisticated, gay Beirut. Gone was the word "welcome" that had greeted me everywhere in Turkey and the Lebanon. Gone were the gay and carefree smiles. Here we were met with scowls and suspicion. But the rudeness of the petty officials was almost friendly as compared with the blatant, searing hatred of the people in the streets. It was clear that foreigners were detested in Baghdad, and that the city was still in the angry phase of revolution. The Government's irregulars swarmed everywhere, ragged bands of five or six men, armed with revolvers and sten guns. They halted any foreign car, apparently for the sole purpose of terrifying the occupants. Murder of a foreigner was a patriotic gesture. Just shoot him and throw his body into the gutter. Or, if the mob was angered, tie a rope to each leg and split him up the centre.

Mr. Palmer, the airline manager, met me at the airport. He had been subjected to the great strain of the revolution for over a year and borne it with stoical good humour. Moreover—gift from heaven—he was a dog-lover. He owned a boxer, and was going to fight the dog quarantine laws in Britain when he retired . . .

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When I told him about Pushkin, his eyes shone.

" You must get her back. Look, I'll have a crate built right away. Very important how it's done. Enough air, you know, and the right place in the aircraft, not too hot, not too cold."

" Do you know where these people live ? "

I brought out the card on which Monsieur Corot had written the address of Monsieur and Madame Gravand.

" Rue d'Artois."

" That's in the suburbs, I think. I'll look it up on the map for you. Then tomorrow you can go there. I hope Gravand is still at liberty. He's an Algerian; Madame, of course, is French. Most of the French have been imprisoned or deported, but as he's Algerian it might be that he's still working . . ."

Mr. Palmer called a taxi, a tumbledown Chevrolet, to take me to the Regent Palace Hotel where I was booked.

The driver did not like my instructions.

" No Regent Palace Hotel," he said, and spat.

" Why, has the name been changed ? "

" Changed. No Regent Palace. Iraq Hotel now. Get in."

I settled into the most unappetising little double bedroom that I have ever occupied. The tariff was grotesquely expensive. There was no bathroom. I " dined " on some very tough steak that looked and smelled suspiciously like buffalo. Then I asked for coffee in the lounge. A turbanned servant who looked desperately unhappy brought the Turkish coffee. There were more than a dozen other guests. They were clustered round a television set, a novelty in Baghdad. Out of curiosity I joined them.

A sombre Iraqui woman was reading the revolutionary news. She looked as if she had never smiled in her life. Then school children performed national dances. Then came some advertising. I thought, This is the worst programme I have ever seen anywhere at any time. It was desperately morose and dull. And then, electrically, the picture changed to show the most dramatic and horrifying scene I have ever seen televised: the political trial of the former Minister of the Interior. This is what the guests had gathered to see.

We sat still in our chairs, fascinated, repelled, outraged.

The accused, a handsome middle-aged Arab, stood erect in the dock. He was unbowed. On either side of him and behind him sat armed police.

On the bench was the presiding Judge of the Special Military Tribunal known as the People's Court.

A friendly Egyptian sitting next to me translated the titbits of the trial. The President was interrupting the proceedings

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constantly to make what appeared to be savage onslaughts on the prisoner. I asked my Egyptian what he was saying.

"He says that his father was a butcher of sheep, but that he is a butcher of traitors. He asks the accused whether he can feel the rope strangling him yet?"

The presiding Judge was clearly enjoying himself in the role of prisoner-baiter. He interpolated all kinds of odd announcements and comments into the trial. He announced the score in the Iraqui-Czechoslovak football match. Then he said, "But let us get on with our work. The hangman is waiting for more of these imperialistic pigs to keep him in practice."

It was not really a trial that we were witnessing. There was no pretence that the prisoner might be acquitted. He was being publicly broken and humiliated. That was the object. The Public Prosecutor would speak for twenty minutes, then stop. On cue, with a bloodcurdling precision, the packed court would rise and the public would howl for the blood of the prisoner. Then, as if nothing had happened, the Prosecutor continued his harangue. Eventually the brave man in the dock, who at first had answered his tormentors, faltered. His voice broke. Under the searing hatred that hemmed him in, he was collapsing in public, his courage crushed . . .

Horrified and disgusted, I went to bed. Eight hours later the call to prayer from a nearby mosque, grotesquely amplified by a loudspeaker, woke me. At once I thought that today I must do my publisher's business, and track down Pushkin, for I was determined to be out of this city of nightmares as soon as I could get an exit permit.

I reached the Gravand home with only one incident. Without warning, in Rashid Street, my driver slammed on his brakes and swerved on to the pavement. A motor cavalcade was approaching at speed. It was General Qasim, surrounded by a dozen of his gunmen. The passers-by cheered. The General waved. I saw only a dark, saturnine face with staring eyes. In a moment he was gone.

It was a comfortable villa in the rue d'Artois, back from the road. I rang the bell. Nothing happened. I rang again. Then at a bedroom window a face appeared. It was the frightened face of a woman. Seeing me, the fear left her face. She nodded, beckoning me to wait.

Madame, whose husband was still working—"He was interrogated for fourteen hours last week, but released"— was delighted to see me. "We are prisoners here," she said, "prisoners at large."

I asked her had she still got Pushkin.

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"But yes, monsieur. I will get her for you. Anatole will be so happy. He loves her, as we do, too."

Pushkin was called, and she entered the room with a rush, jumping up to Madame excitedly, as if she knew there was news. Then she walked over to where I stood and regarded me with eyes that were at once trusting and mischievous. Pushkin, who appeared to be part terrier, part Pekingese, was irresistible.

I thanked Madame for her kindness. She was both sorry to lose Pushkin—"That little one understands all"—and yet pleased that she was returning to her master.

I felt guilty at leaving Madame to the mercies of the ghastly mobs who roamed the city, but she had the courage of France. "We shall come through. Things cannot get worse. I only hope you get your permit quickly. Au revoir, monsieur. And remember us kindly to Monsieur Corot."

Pushkin may have been correctly described as "commune" but she was certainly very intelligent. From the moment she consented to accompany me, I could have sworn that she understood I was going, if I could, to reunite her with her master. She was still when the situation seemed to demand it, gay when no danger threatened, and obedient. She was also house-trained.

On the return I thought nothing of it when our driver halted with a screech of brakes. General Qasim again, or some other revolutionary leader, I thought. It was not that. A group of irregulars had signalled to the driver to stop. There were five of them; their leader, a youth of twenty or so, carried a sten gun. This he thrust into the back seat of the car. When I tried to turn it away from my body, he thrust it into my ribs, ordering one of his men to hold it there.

He spoke to the driver.

"This man says you are a spy. He says why should he not shoot you? What are you doing here?"

My mind flashed back to the 8th December 1941 when my Japanese captor had used almost identical words. I showed the young man my letters of introduction. He read them unbelievingly. He spoke to the driver again, and this time his voice held more menace.

"This man says your letters are forgeries. Can you prove they are not. He says he must shoot you."

"Tell him to ring up the police and ask them himself."

The young man hesitated, but he took the sten gun from my ribs. He handed it to a follower and gave an order.

The driver interpreted. "We must stay here, or you die. This man go to find out your letter true or lies."

We waited forty minutes in the scorching sun, not daring to

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stir, covered by an even younger member of the band. Then the leader returned. He barked at the driver, who interpreted, "We can go now. You are not to be shot."

The leader of the irregulars spat at the window of the taxi. Very slowly the driver started the engine. We were released.

Pushkin had not stirred during this incident, nor had she showed any terror. She sat there as if she knew I could deal with any threat that arose. She was more confident than I was.

Mr. Palmer was waiting for me at the hotel. I told him what had happened.

"You were lucky. They usually shoot first and inquire afterwards. Look, I've had a crate made. It's perfect. I had to sit over the fellow as he worked to get the airholes right. Cost a dinar. Not bad . . ."

I thanked him.

"I'm going to do my private business this afternoon, and then call at the Passport Office for an exit permit. Have you a plane in the morning?"

"Wednesday? Yes. Leaves at noon."

"I'll be on it."

"Wish I was coming with you."

"I don't know about you, but I need a drink, a very large cold beer."

"I'll join you."

I managed to complete my business and obtain my exit permit. Pushkin, who would not leave my side for a moment, sat in the car. That night she slept at the foot of my bed. Mr. Palmer was at the airport with his crate. We expected that Pushkin would have to be coaxed or tricked into it. I showed her the crate. Without a backward glance she walked in and sat down.

"That dog knows she's going to Corot. She must know."

It certainly looked like that . . .

When we touched down in Beirut again, Monsieur Corot was the first man to board the plane.

"How is she?"

"You'll see for yourself. She has behaved as if she knew she was joining you." Five minutes later Pushkin walked out of her crate, saw her master, and leapt into his arms.

Anatole Corot, with the little red ribbon, who had fought with the Royal Air Force, hugged his friend. For a moment I thought that he was going to weep. Instead, he said in a voice that was not quite even, "Pushkin, you are an abominable nuisance."

Pushkin barked. She was home again.

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POLE BUDDY

BY WILLIAM WISTER HAINES

AFTER his pole buddy married, Dave turned his front wheels westward, alone. At work he hoped to cut it now with any lineman he might meet. The other companionship of play and travel, pranks and scraps and girls, was something you didn't replace lightly. A good girl might be worth it, if a man wanted a good girl. The marriage reminded Dave how much more of the world there was for a footloose lineman of twenty-six to see.

The spaciousness of the west accentuated Dave's loneliness. He by-passed four suitable jobs before facing the truth squarely. Then he saw, between dusty foothills and granite needles piercing the austerity of timber-line snowfields, the silvery steel of new transmission towers and the gold of the copper wire the pylons carried, striding their stately path through slopes of green pine.

He drove to the construction camp with the quickening fusion of challenge and homecoming that begins every new job.

It was quitting time, with gangs already unloading trucks in the steelyard. Dave got out slowly to give the foreman a good look at his arms and shoulders. The first man who scanned his licence plates was Big Harry.

"You from the east, lineman?" It bordered on truculence.

"That's what's the matter," said Dave levelly.

If the west wanted to make anything of that, this was the time and Big Harry was the right size. Without ever having seen him before, Dave knew a lot about Big Harry. There was a blowhard on every job, a guy who wanted to dominate. It could be harmless, ludicrous, dangerous. A man dealt with that as it came up.

In size, this one was formidable. Big Harry had forty pounds and several inches by any dimension over Dave's own rangy

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resilience. That high bald forehead and round face might be genial or sullen; they would always be shrewd. He'd had time to study Dave and had decided on good nature now.

" You'll likely teach us some tricks," he said.

" A man goes travelling to learn," Dave replied.

Then he busied himself getting out his tools because a good foreman always looks at a man's tools and a good lineman watches how he does it. This was easy, perhaps because the foreman had been watching the colloquy. Big Harry hastened to put his own approving oar into the hiring.

" I'll fade him myself if he's single," he said.

That, at least, touched accord in Dave. He preferred single pole buddies, too. He expected to look out for himself and do his best by a partner in trouble. But linework was hazardous; a wife was one more worry for both men on top.

It was a measure of Big Harry's local prestige that the foreman did pair them. This job happened to be on steel towers. Immemorial custom makes any two linemen working anywhere pole buddies. Their first hour showed Dave that for work, Big Harry was a good one.

He led off, carrying the handline up their first tower as the older hand on a job should. His gigantic frame took the eighty-odd feet to the cross-arm without puffing and walked the three-inch angle steel with catty balance of good nerves in nimble muscles. He lashed their scaling-ladder with an expert hitch, slipped down it with a fluid ease that belied his bulk, snapped on his safety-strap with care and leaned confidently back in his belt, a steadying pendulum for Dave's descent. His eyes followed every detail of Dave's matching movement. Then as they swayed easily in perfect balance across the ladder from each other, Big Harry grinned approvingly.

" I wanted you for a pole buddy, first sight."

It was more than Dave would return so soon. He knew he'd been spoilt by years of perfect harmony, on top and off the job. Perhaps this would work out well. There would be time to satisfy the elusive impressions that did not yet add up to trust.

Otherwise the job was ideal. Wages, mess-tent, and bunk-house were good. The nightly poker game was honest, albeit stiff. The country was exhilarating. And Big Harry was extending professional admiration to social sponsorship. He bragged of the record he had gleaned by insistent questions on Dave's past; he vowed that he'd found a partner to match him for life. After this job he and Dave would hook up permanently.

Sooner or later this would mean a showdown. It began with Dave's reluctance to join Big Harry for a pay-day bust in town.

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For the first two weeks Dave declined this ritual of the new relationship. Then he was ready for some bright lights himself. If he couldn't match Big Harry on a spree as well as at work, this was the time to find it out.

En route to town Big Harry boasted triumphantly. He liked showing a younger man the ropes; he liked buddies who could play as hard as they worked. Big Harry had the best of phone numbers and local information. The fools in camp blew their pay cheques at the Bijou. Big Harry knew that its liquor was watered and its card game rigged. He left Dave at the door of a sidestreet saloon to wait while he made other arrangements.

The first thing Dave saw in the dim light inside were Lucille's long and shapely legs dangling from a bar stool. He moved towards them casually. Dave had a young lineman's experience of the girls you met in bars. He had come to town intending to add to it. Covert scrutiny from a nearby stool convinced him that she was not a bar girl.

While he watched, she rejected overtures from two inquirers with bleak finality. She was unpainted, thin and shabby as no bar girl would be. She was nursing the remains of a short beer while she ate her way ravenously through the free peanuts under the barman's indignant eyes.

When one of the strangers repeated his mistake with an insistent offer to buy her anything she would drink, Dave saw the barman meditating ultimatum. She saw it, too. The man offered again and the barman was clearing his throat.

"Let her alone," said Dave quietly.

The man appraised Dave and walked away muttering. The girl choked out a "Thanks," and returned her eyes to her beer. To propitiate the outraged barman for her, more than for himself, Dave tossed his pay cheque on the bar and asked for a pen. All deference now, the barman produced a pen and a stack of dollar bills. The girl raised a white, tense face.

"Could you lend me ten dollars?"

This surprise gave the barman's vindictiveness a chance.

"This broad bothering you, pal?"

Eyes on the barman's hands, Dave heard her choking sob.

"This lady is my friend," he said.

The hands twitched indecisively; no bottle or bung starter appeared. The girl buried her face in an arm on the bar with a flurry of blonde hair and sobs. When they had subsided, Dave touched her arm gently. "How long since you've eaten?"

"Yesterday, breakfast. I really meant 'lend'."

"Tell Big Harry I'll be back," Dave instructed the barman.

In the better light of the restaurant she was pretty, in a worn

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way, and older than he had thought, older than himself. He forgot it in compassion. The story she unfolded between hungry mouthfuls would have hardened any face.

Her mother had deserted the family while Lucille was at school. Her father had been an unskilled labourer in the east with no insurance, no eligibility for compensation. After he was stricken with a protracted illness, Lucille's sister had run off with a man to Seattle. When her father's death ended the nightmare years as nurse and waitress, Lucille had headed west by bus, hoping to find her sister. Between the last town and this her purse had been rifled as she slept.

" I tried for work everywhere." She lowered her eyes and then faced him. " I was going to do something bad when you came in there, Dave."

" Everyone gets lonely," said Dave with embarrassment.

" You don't care what happens when you've got no one."

" You've got me," said Dave. " Everyone needs a friend."

After dinner he went through the local power company linemen until he found one with a wife who would take Lucille as a lodger and help her get work. She did not cry again until he was pressing money into her hand on departure.

" If you'll promise it's just a loan," she stipulated.

" I'm no bank, woman. I got no licence to lend money." He grinned and closed her hand over it.

" This way, I wouldn't see you again," she insisted.

Adversity had taught Lucille things, he reflected. She knew that helping makes a stronger tie than being helped. But who would want a girl who didn't know that?

" Tomorrow night," Dave grinned, " and not for money."

Then, right in front of the other couple, she had kissed his cheek and hurried in confusion to her own room.

The surprise came from Big Harry. Dave was braced for the cynicism that lurked always below that forced geniality. He had no stomach for other girls or drinks now. Big Harry could have been reproachful over their lost spree. Instead his voice was gentle with sympathy.

" You're a decent guy, Dave; always were."

Dave had never thought of that, either way. Now he hoped it was true. Lucille deserved something decent.

His return found welcome change in her. No one could lose that defensive hardness overnight. Yet now there was hope in her eyes and voice. Her new friends had found her a job in the laundry. They insisted on keeping her as a boarder meantime.

" I don't need this now." She extended his money.

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"Keep it a while, anyway."

"Will it bring you back, again, Dave?"

"You're what brings me back," said Dave.

"You don't give a damn about money, do you, Dave?"

Except that it kept him in good tools and clothes and a car and sprees between jobs, he never had. He found her obsessive interest in it faintly disturbing. She exulted in saving dimes over menu combinations; she insisted on his lugging in his clothes for the discount the laundry gave her.

It was not an endearing quality and yet he could make allowances for the experiences that had made her so. He could reflect ruefully now on the careless prodigalities of his past. With a woman like this he would have saved money; perhaps you never began saving till you found the right woman.

There were other differences in the relationship. Lucille could leave him content with simple pleasures. He took her decorously to dinner, to a film, to saunter through the Mexican end of the town, absorbing the fragrance of pinon smoke and the tinkle of guitars. They walked through the little park and watched the reflection of a young moon on the series of pools in a chuckling mountain stream.

Part of him resisted; more of him quickened every time he turned his car towards town. He wanted more now than ten hours of every day looking at a succession of Big Harrys across a scaling-ladder or tower face.

He never actually had to decide. Lucille turned her face up to him one night in the dim moonlight of the park and resolved every doubt with one kiss. When they returned to practicality, the only problem was the date.

"A man should save a bit before marrying."

"We didn't fall in love for money," said Lucille.

"You know linework can be—dangerous?"

"I want to share that with you." She smiled wanly. "I'm tough, too, Dave. Daddy never had any compensation."

"You'll have plenty of that . . ." Her lips stopped him.

"I know that. What I want is you."

He insisted on waiting till he had two more pay-cheques under his belt.

Big Harry wouldn't climb with a married man. Dave thought the foreman would keep him anyhow, but if he didn't like his new pole buddy the move would be up to him. That meant travel, for two; you had to think of everything differently when you were going to be married . . .

He had suppressed his misgivings by the day Hook rode the company supply truck into camp. Hook didn't even have a

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jacket. But from the toothbrush in a frayed pocket through the tool roll in worn overalls to the hookstrap marks on broken boots, Hook's presence proclaimed a lineman that any other lineman alive would be proud to claim on or off the job.

Dave heard Big Harry's voice. " That guy could be your twin."

Facially it was not true. Hook's was leaner than his own. His black Irish eyes and hair were in contrast with the Scots blue and yellow in Dave's colouring. In physique they were nearly identical, with the rangy, flat-bellied muscularity linework gave the good bodies it attracted. Hook walked with his own slight outward flick of the feet. A gait that came from years of keeping the sharp gaffs on wood hooks apart.

A difference of circumstances merely accentuated the likeness of attitude. Dave had happened to strike this job with a good car, and a roll in his pocket. Hook's evident poverty awaited the foreman with a confidence that had no need to beg or boast. His eyes glinted amusedly at Big Harry's usual overtures.

" Which way you from, lineman? "

" West, if it's any of your business," said Hook quietly.

Big Harry glowered uncertainly. Afterwards he told Dave he would have run the cocky stranger out of camp if the foreman hadn't intervened. Dave had not bothered to reply. In the first place, Hook was not cocky. In the second, neither Big Harry nor anyone else would have run Hook anywhere and everyone in the steelyard knew it. That was probably what made Big Harry so instantly hostile to Hook, though chance gave him a better excuse. That week, as the foreman explained regretfully, the gangs were full.

" I'll grunt to get started here," said Hook.

He ignored Big Harry's sneer, keeping his eyes on the foreman with a selfcontrol Dave could respect. He'd been hungry, too; it was nothing to sneer about when a good man accepted the humiliating retrogression from top pay and status to helper. Fortunately, the foreman knew that too. He knew he was getting both a bargain and a spare lineman. When it was over and he had pointed out the bunkhouse across the rain-drenched camp, Dave took Hook aside with a disarming smile.

" I got a spare jacket isn't working, lineman."

Hook scarcely hesitated between offence and appreciation. His responding smile still framed a hard independence. " Thanks. But I ain't sugar, I won't melt."

" You could return it, after pay-day," said Dave.

" Come pay-day, I'd return a new one, with thanks."

It had not begun a friendship. It had ratified one implicit in their first meeting. Now, of course, it would be limited because

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Dave himself was about to marry. That in itself could be turned to advantage for Hook.

It confirmed Dave's opinion to find Hook assigned to grunt for him and Big Harry next morning. He never knew or asked how it had been arranged. It took some doing for a new helper to make the foreman juggle gangs as he wished, and Hook had been up to that doing.

Big Harry had been furious and then thoughtful. You couldn't knock a helper who reduced your work and increased your production. Some lineman, downgraded by misfortune to helping, were sullen and laggard. Hook gave them a skill and diligence to match their own. He added the unremitting vigilance for their safety of a man who knows what's happening on top.

Perhaps just because it was too late for the companionship he might have hoped for, it gave Dave satisfaction to make his marriage help Hook. He had kept his plans to himself. He waited until the foreman was present to announce them to the other two. If Big Harry still objected to a married pole buddy, they both knew by then that Hook could fade any lineman alive. Dave would move to another gang or farther, as the foreman wished.

Hook's usual impassivity had started at the announcement of Dave's impending marriage. Big Harry gave him no chance to speak. He'd break his own rule to continue as pole buddy with Dave. The foreman was delighted. He wanted to keep Dave. And, happily, there would be an opening in another gang to give Hook top rate next week.

"I want to keep grunting for these two," said Hook.

"You'd rather grunt for them than climb for yourself?"

"That's it." Hook was unequivocal.

It nearly ripped the whole thing. Big Harry snorted that he didn't want a grunt who claimed to have been a lineman and was scared to climb. Hook kept silent with visible effort. The foreman was inclining towards Big Harry's attitude when Dave intervened. Customarily friction between any top man and a grunt moved the grunt. Here, Dave's wish to help had backfired on the innocent Hook. Choosing his words with conciliatory care, Dave made it clear that if they moved Hook against his will, Dave would quit. That did it. The other two quickly agreed to leave things as they were and congratulated Dave.

After work Hook detained him. Dave was preparing to disavow any need for thanks when Hook spoke.

"You're marrying kind of sudden, Dave."

He knew he was touchy about that. He also knew that if Hook meant offence it would not be ambiguous.

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"Happens so sometimes," he smiled.

"I'd like to meet your bride and congratulate her."

Dave offered a plausible lie about shortage of time. The camp would meet her soon enough, when he brought her to the tent being prepared in the tent-and-trailer section where couples lived. It would be better for her to meet them all as his wife with no talk of her origins.

Hook accepted this without comment, and Dave didn't think of it again until he brought Lucille out. He had offered her a wedding trip and had been pleased with her decision against it. Married men should stick to good wages while they lasted; there would be time for travel between jobs.

So they had said their words and been married before a justice on Saturday night, cut a cake with the other couple that had befriended her, gone to the village hotel, and driven out to camp that Sunday. When he stopped his car before the tent, Hook was sitting on the stoop.

Hook explained that he didn't wish to intrude. He had brought the bride mountain flowers and his congratulations. Lucille accepted both with thanks and was waiting for him to leave when Hook persisted uncomfortably. He begged her consent for a few minutes to talk to Dave about the job, alone. Dave followed him impatiently to the seclusion of a little glade along the camp creek. There the apologetic diffidence vanished; he confronted a face tense and determined.

"In a minute you'll want to slug me," said Hook. "Will you wait till you hear it all?"

"Get on with it," said Dave.

"Did you meet her in a bar with a guy plaguing her?"

His fists had knotted by instinct before he remembered. Hook's hands were extended, limp and open, before him.

"Two guys," said Dave. "Go on."

"You've made out your compensation papers to her?"

"Naturally."

"Sit down, and I'll tell you why I ain't climbing."

He had, he told Dave, boomed around western construction jobs for years with a pole buddy named Eddie Kilvain.

"He was a reckless, lighthearted, devil-take-it guy on the ground. On top he was good as you."

"Go on," said Dave.

In a town five hundred miles from here on a bust one pay-day, Hook and Eddie had split briefly. Hook preferred cards to women. He had been taking an expensive poker lesson from three strangers in a bar when one of them dropped a fifth ace on the table. Hook had two of them groggy before the third

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returned with his brother, the sheriff. Eddie got Hook a lawyer but they were transient linemen against pillars of the community. The best the lawyer could get Hook was thirty days for being drunk and disorderly.

So Hook was lying it out in gaol and Eddie was forking out the lawyer's fee and cigarette money for both when, abruptly, his nightly visits stopped. A week later he came to the gaol with the sheepish announcement that he was now married.

For a man of Eddie's tastes this was a constant hazard. However, no particular candidate had been in sight when Hook was gaoled. Eddie explained, defensively, that it had been a whirlwind courtship, begun when Eddie defended a persecuted girl in a saloon. Hook could judge her for himself when he got out; she had told Eddie she disliked gaols.

"Don't blame her," Hook had said dryly.

"She's purty, whatever else she is," Eddie had grinned. "I parked where you could see her through the window."

To oblige him Hook had crossed the cell for a glimpse at the dim figure in a car across the dark alley. Then he praised a beauty he had scarcely seen and shook hands through the bars with Eddie. Next evening another lineman from the job came in to tell him Eddie had been killed at work that day.

With Hook's gaoling Eddie had been assigned a pole buddy new to the job. They had worked harmoniously for days before an apparent failure of Eddie's safety-strap had plunged him eighty feet from their ladder to a rocky tower base. It was a tower isolated by hills and turns from the others, and their grunt had been sent off for supplies. When the others came up, the new lineman had reached Eddie's body. He showed them that Eddie's safety-strap had lost a spring on the keeper of a snap. They conjectured that it must have broken and slipped out before Eddie, relying on it completely, had made his last fateful swivel to work out at arm's length from the ladder.

"A spring *could* break," said Dave.

"Eddie and I checked snaps, before every turn."

"Did you talk to the other lineman about it?"

"Never saw him," said Hook. "Claimed he was so shook he quit after the inquest. Then he disappeared, fast."

"What did his wife think?"

"Never saw her again. She cashed the compensation money before Eddie was cold and quit the country."

"Did you tell the law?"

"I was in gaol, Dave. Time I got out, the case was closed as an accident."

"Didn't you do nothing about it?"

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"Nothing—only follow that guy for three years," said Hook. "A lineman was killed about the same way in Oregon a year later, just before I got there. Next one was Nevada, this spring: a different state every time, you notice. The pole buddy descriptions fit Big Harry."

"Is Lucille the girl you saw from the gaol?"

"That alley was dark, Dave. But she could be."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I was using you for bait."

"Why are you telling me now?"

"I thought it over; you'd friended me."

"What if I ask her and Big Harry, straight out?"

"We couldn't prove it, but you'd be safe," said Hook.

"Till they ditch me and catch another fool?"

"Another lineman—if I'm right," said Hook.

"You'd better be right," said Dave.

He could not entirely believe it until the next morning when he saw Big Harry's skinning-knife come out. Most linemen didn't carry skinning-knives on tower work. Big Harry always wore one you could shave with. Its innocent appearance now was the last link in the long chain of Hook's patient reasoning and implacable pursuit.

That morning Big Harry had insisted, out of turn, in driving them in his car up the steel-truck trail to the isolated tower. He had managed to get Dave to send Hook ahead, out of sight, to the next tower to check supplies. He had done his half of this job first, drawn his knife with the plausible explanation of replacing a frayed handline tail while Dave finished up.

Against overwhelming evidence, Dave had resisted believing it. For him it violated more than law or humanity itself. It outraged the highest intangible of linework; the thing that gave especial pride to work in high places or on hot wire because you could count on trusting other linemen as they trusted you.

He and Big Harry were clipping, transferring the great wires from the pulleys through which they are tensioned to final clamps in the long strings of insulators that suspend them from tower arms.

It was hard work and relatively simple. They were belted as usual face to face across the long scaling-ladder hung down beside the limp insulators from the arm. The final part of it required an arm-length stretch back from the ladder with full dependence on belt and safety-strap. Big Harry had done his first, had watched Hook disappear into the wooded trail ahead, and had got his knife out.

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Now Dave stretched back as usual, feet on the bottom rung of the ladder, full weight on his belt and safety, eyes following his hard hands out to the wire and then squinting back from the shelter of a shoulder. As Big Harry slashed the taut belt, Dave gave a hard kick and swung his body out in a long arc, hooking an expert knee up over the wire. He had time to swing his body up and come to experienced balance astride the wire, safely beyond striking distance, before he confronted the stupefaction in Big Harry's face and heard Hook's voice from the bushes.

" Come down slow, Harry, with your hands off your tools."

Even through his astonishment, Big Harry recovered fast. He was already babbling of an accident—anyone's hand could slip, trimming a rope. Hook's voice from the ground chilled the sweat on Dave's back.

" Come down, or I'll come up for you, Harry."

Big Harry climbed up the ladder, crossed the arm, and went down the step-bolt leg very slowly, head moving from Dave who followed him, after regaining the ladder, to Hook who waited on the ground. There, eyeing the skinning-knife in Hook's left hand, the pliers in his right, Big Harry tried again. It was an accident—

" The kind Eddie Kilvain had," said Hook.

Big Harry started and shut up, sweating.

" You switched safeties *after* you cut his, didn't you, Harry? You won't need that spare one in your car now."

" Lots of linemen carry spare safeties," said Big Harry.

" Not with the keeper spring out of one snap."

" That don't prove nothing," said Big Harry.

" Confessions do," said Hook. " If you talk, Harry, there's three states waiting to kill you. But they'll do it fast. If you won't talk, I'll do it right now, very slow."

Big Harry looked at the faces on either side of him. He heard the faint, aggressive click of Hook's plier-jaws.

" I'll talk," he said.

Dave cleared his throat and found he could speak again.

" You can tell the law about Eddie," he said. " You're telling me how you got Lucille into this."

Big Harry shook his head in weary, total surrender.

" I didn't. She got me into it, always wanting more money. You aren't married to that woman, Dave. I am."

He didn't have another private word with Hook until, after the confessions were signed and the inexorable processes of the law begun, they walked out of the county gaol and stood in the sunlight looking at the distant mountains.

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"You were right," said Dave.

"Took you to prove it," said Hook.

"Then it is over," said Dave.

"It is all over, with my thanks," said Hook. He glanced at Dave's car by the kerb and at his own ragged clothes. He set his eyes back on the distant mountains and kept his voice casual, noncommittal.

"Tying this job off, or booming up?"

Dave looked at the car and the mountains and then at Hook.

"Wouldn't care, with the right pole buddy."

"Neither would I," said Hook. © William Wister Haines 1963

THE EQUILIBRIST

The taut path of air
Flickers between his feet,
Which he poises on pin
Points ; he dips a long
Leg deep into space,
He rides astride
The saddle of light
Wire and leaps right
Out of himself on
To nothing, nimble perch,
Fluttering sharp
Fans or hoisting a tight
Parasol, the odd
Wings of his equal hands,
As he dallies on springs
Of space from one
Place to another, minces
High on the prancing wire
That curvets like deep
Water whose high
Sea's single wave
He playfully wanders and—

—but this, too,
Is meditated, and
It is we who, caught
Off our balance, willingly
Trip
and
fall.

JAMES KIRKUP

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BREAKFAST TIME

Breakfast makes good memory.

RABELAIS

Having dressed myself I went to the coffee-room and sat down. What a breakfast! pot of hare; ditto of trout; pot of prepared shrimps; dish of plain shrimps; tin of sardines; beautiful beefsteak; eggs, muffin; large loaf and butter, not forgetting capital tea. There's a breakfast for you!

GEORGE BORROW, *Wild Wales*

Mess of Pottage

Scouring out the porridge pot,
Round and round and round!

Out with all the scraith and scoopery,
Lift the eely ooly droopery,
Chase the glubbery slubbery gloopery
Round and round and round!

Out with all the doleful dithery,
Ladle out the slimy slithery,
Hunt and catch the hithery thithery,
Round and round and round!

Out with all the obbly gubbly,
On the stove it burns so bubbly,
Use the spoon and use it doubly,
Round and round and round!

J. A. LINDON, *Sink Song*

Oats. A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.

SAMUEL JOHNSON, *Dictionary of the English Language*

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What—No Parritch?

. . . The breakfasts! that's what redeems the land—and every county has its own peculiar excellence. In Argyllshire you have the Lochfyne herring—fat, luscious, and delicious, just out of the water, falling to pieces with its own richness—melting away like butter in your mouth. In Aberdeenshire you have the Finnan haddock with a flavour all its own, vastly relishing—just salt enough to be piquant, without parching you up with thirst. In Perthshire there is the Tay salmon, kippered, crisp, and juicy—a very magnificent morsel!—a leetle heavy, but that's easily counteracted by a teaspoonful of the Athole whisky. In other places you have the exquisite mutton of the country, made into hams of a most delicate flavour; flour scones, soft and white; oatcake, thin and crisp; marmalade of every description.

SUSAN FERRIER, *Marriage*

Early bacon, early bacon!
Oh, the pleasant sight to see,
Sires come down for early bacon,
With an egg and pot of tea.

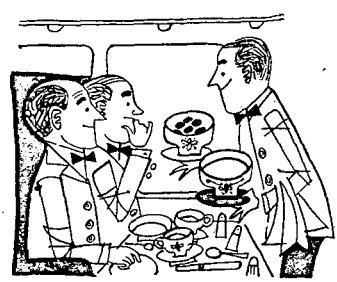
Early bacon, early bacon!
Oh, the happy hours I fed,
Deep in joy on early bacon,
Coming from a comfy bed.

Early bacon, early bacon!
That's the breakfast dish for me,
All alone with early bacon,
With the paper on my knee!

ARCHIBALD STODART-WALKER, *Early Bacon*

Porridge or Prunes, Sir?

Breakfast could not be served until the train started . . . At last the engine gave a jerk, the knives and forks slid sideways and sang against one another sadly, the cups said "cheap, cheap" to the saucers, as well they might, the door swung open and the attendants came in crying "Porridge or Prunes, sir? Porridge or Prunes?"



Breakfast had begun.

E. M. FORSTER

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Saucy!

" Now breakfast," said Merlyn.

The Wart saw that the most perfect breakfast was laid out neatly for two, on a table before the window. . . .

" Have some mustard," said the magician, when they had got to the kidneys.

The mustard-pot got up and walked over to his plate on thin silver legs that waddled like the owl's. Then it uncurled its handles and one handle lifted its lid with exaggerated courtesy while the other helped him to a generous spoonful.

" Oh, I love the mustard-pot! " cried the Wart. " Wherever did you get it? "

At this the pot beamed all over its face and began to strut a bit, but Merlyn rapped it on the head with a teaspoon, so that it sat down and shut up at once.

" It is not a bad pot," he said grudgingly. " Only it is inclined to give itself airs."

T. H. WHITE, *The Sword in the Stone*

Pain-ful

What wonder the Frenchman, blown out with new bread,
Gesticulates oft and is light in the head;
Our perfect control of our arms and our legs
We owe to our ballast of bacon and eggs . . .

Coffee and rolls,
Ladylike rolls;
Sing coffee,
Pooh! coffee,
Black coffee and rolls!

A. P. HERBERT, *Bacon and Eggs*

Cover Charged

A thing Englishmen find hard to get used to [in America] is the habit of serving everything on one plate—bacon, eggs, toast and marmalade, or grape jelly—and one knife for everything. Then there are the wheat cakes. They are like a pancake only thicker and fluffier, and you order either a stack (which is three) or a short stack (which is two). They are served with butter and lots of maple syrup, and they are extremely good—but they are usually served with bacon on the same plate, and this is rather a strain on the visiting Englishman.

JOHN CRAWLEY

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WATERMELON MOON

"Nobody would dare try," Freddy said,
"bright as day like it is . . ."

BY BORDEN DEAL

WHEN I think of the summer I was sixteen, a lot of things come crowding in to be thought about. We had moved just the year before, and sixteen is still young enough for the bunch one goes with to make a difference. I had a bunch, all right, but they weren't sure of me yet. I didn't know why. Maybe because I'd lived in town, and my father still worked there instead of farming, like the other fathers did. The boys I knew, even Freddy Gray and J. D., still kept a small distance between us.

Then there was Willadean Wills. I hadn't been much interested in girls before. But I had to admit to myself that I was interested in Willadean. She was my age, nearly as tall as I, and up till the year before, Freddy Gray told me, she had been good at playing their games. But she didn't play games this year. She was tall and slender, and Freddy Gray and J. D. and I had several discussions about the way she walked. I maintained she was putting it on, but J.D. claimed she couldn't help it. Freddy Gray remarked that she hadn't walked that way last year. He said she'd walked like any other human being. So then I said, put on or not, I liked the way she walked, and then there was a large silence.

It wasn't a comfortable silence, because of Mr. Wills, Willadean's father. We were all afraid of Mr. Wills.

Mr. Wills was a big man. He had bright, fierce eyes under heavy brows and, when he looked down at you, you just withered. The idea of having him directly and immediately angry at one of us was enough to shrivel the soul. All that summer Willadean walked up and down the high road or sat in their front garden in a rocking chair, her dress flared out around her, and not one of us dared do more than say good morning to her.

Mr. Wills was the best farmer in the community. My father said he could drive a stick into the ground and grow a tree out of

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it. But it wasn't an easy thing with him; Mr. Wills fought the earth when he worked it. When he ploughed his fields, you could hear him yelling for a mile. It was as though he dared the earth not to yield him its sustenance.

Above all, Mr. Wills could raise watermelons. Now, watermelons are curious things. Some men can send off for the best watermelon seed, they can plant it in the best ground they own, they can hoe it and tend it with the greatest of care, and they can't raise a melon bigger than your two fists. Other men, like Mr. Wills, can throw seed on the ground, scuff dirt over it, walk off and leave it and have a crop of the prettiest, biggest melons you ever saw.

Mr. Wills always planted the little field directly behind his barn with watermelons. It ran from the barn to the creek, a good piece of land with just the right sandy soil for melon raising. And it seemed as though the melons just bulged up out of the ground for him.

But they were Mr. Wills' melons; he didn't have any idea of sharing them with the boys of the neighbourhood. He was fiercer about his melons than anything else; if you just happened to walk close to his melon patch, you'd see Mr. Wills standing and watching you with a glower on his face. And likely as not he'd have his gun under his arm.

Everybody expected to lose a certain quantity of their watermelons to terrapins and a certain quantity to boys. It wasn't considered stealing to sneak into a man's melon patch and judiciously borrow a sample of his crop. You might get a load of salt in the seat of your shorts if you were seen, but that was part of the game. You'd be looked down on only if you got malicious and stamped a lot of melons into the ground while you were about it. But Mr. Wills didn't think that way.

That summer I was sixteen Mr. Wills raised the greatest watermelon ever seen in that part of the country. It grew in the very middle of his patch, three times as big as any melon anybody had ever seen. Men came from miles around to look at it. Mr. Wills wouldn't let them go into the melon patch. They had to stand around the edge.

Just like all other daredevil boys in that part of the world, Freddy Gray and J.D. and I had talked idly about stealing that giant watermelon. But we all knew that it was just talk. Not only were we afraid of Mr. Wills and his rages but we knew that Mr. Wills sat in the hayloft window of his barn every night with his shotgun, guarding the melon. It was his seed melon. He meant to plant next year's crop out of that great one and maybe grow a whole field of them. Mr. Wills was in a frenzy of fear

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that somebody would steal it. Why, he would rather you stole Willadean than his melon. At least, he didn't guard Willadean with his shotgun.

Every night I could sit on our front porch and see Mr. Wills sitting up there in the window of his hayloft, looking fiercely out over his melon patch. I'd sit there by the hour and watch him, the shotgun cradled in his arm, and feel the tremors of fear and excitement chasing up and down my spine.

"Look at him," my father would say. "Scared to death somebody will steal his seed melon. Nobody would steal a man's seed melon."

"He ought to be in the house taking care of that wife of his," my mother would say tartly. "She's been poorly all year."

You hardly ever saw Mrs. Wills. She was a wraith of a woman, pale as a butter bean. Sometimes she would sit for an hour or two in their garden in the cool of the day. They didn't visit back and forth with anybody though.

"There's Willadean," my father would say mildly.

My mother would make a funny kind of sound that meant disgust. "He cares more about that seed melon than about his wife," she'd say. "I wish somebody would steal it. Maybe then—"

"Helen," my father would say, chiding, "you shouldn't even think of such a thing."

About the time the great watermelon was due to become ripe, there was a night of a full moon. J.D. and Freddy Gray and I had decided we'd go swimming in the creek, so I left the house when the moon rose and went to meet them.

The moon floated up into the sky, making everything almost as bright as day, but at the same time softer and gentler than ever daylight could be. It was the kind of night when you feel as though you can do anything in the world—even boldly ask Willadean Wills for a date. On a night like that, you couldn't help but feel that she'd gladly accept.

"Boy, what a moon!" J.D. said when I met them.

"Wouldn't you like to take old Willadean out on a night like this?" Freddy Gray said.

We scoffed at him, but secretly in our hearts we knew how he felt. We were getting old enough to think that that sort of thing might be a lot more fun than going swimming in the moonlight.

As I said before I was one of their bunch. J.D. and Freddy Gray were my good friends. But because I was still new, there were certain things and certain feelings where I was left out. This was one of them; they were afraid, because I was

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more of a stranger to Willadean, that she might like the idea of dating me better than she did either of them. This was all way down under the surface, because none of us had admitted to ourselves that we wanted to be Willadean's boyfriend. But far down though it was, I could feel it, and they could feel it.

" I wish I had a newspaper," I said then. " I'll bet you could read it in this moonlight."

We had reached the swimming hole in the creek, and we began shucking off our clothes. We were all excited by the moonlight, yelling at one another and rushing to be first into the water. Freddy Gray made it first, J.D. and I catapulting in right behind him. The water was cold, and the shock of it struck a chill into us. But we got rid of it by a brisk water fight, and then we were all right.

We climbed out finally, to rest, and sat on the bank. That big old moon sailed serenely overhead, climbing higher into the sky, and we lay on our backs to look up at it.

" Old Man Wills won't have to worry about anybody stealing his melon tonight, anyway," Freddy Gray said. " Nobody would dare try it, bright as day like it is."

" He's not taking any chances," J.D. said. " I saw him sitting up in that hayloft when I came by, his shotgun loaded with buckshot. That melon is as safe as it would be in the bank."

" Shucks," I said in a scoffing voice, " he ain't got buckshot in that gun. He's just got a load of salt, like anybody else guarding a watermelon patch."

Freddy Gray sat upright, looking at me. " Don't kid yourself son," he said loftily. " He told my daddy that he had it loaded with double-ought buckshot."

" Why," I said, " that would kill a man."

" That's what he's got in mind," Freddy Gray said, " if anybody goes after that seed melon."

It disturbed me more than it should have. After all, I'd never had it in mind to try for the melon, had I?

" I don't believe it," I said flatly. " He wouldn't kill anybody over a watermelon. Even a seed melon like that one."

" Old Man Wills would," J.D. said.

Freddy Gray was still watching me. " What's got you into such a tizzy? " he said. " You weren't planning on going after that melon yourself? "

" Well, yes," I said. " As a matter of fact I was."

There was a moment of respectful silence. Even from me. I hadn't known I was going to say those words. To this day I don't know why I said them. It was all mixed up with Willadean and the rumour of Mr. Wills having his gun loaded with double-

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ought buckshot and the boys still thinking of me as an outsider. It surged up out of me—not the idea of making my name for years to come by such a deed, but the feeling that there was a rightness in defying the world and Mr. Wills.

Mixed up with it all there came into my mouth the taste of watermelon. I could taste the sweet red juices oozing over my tongue, feel the delicate threaded redness of the heart as I squeezed the juices out of it.

I stood up. "As a matter of fact," I said, "I'm going after it right now."

"Wait a minute," J.D. said in alarm. "You can't do it on a moonlight night like this. It's two hundred yards from the creek bank to that melon. He'll see you for sure."

"Wait until a dark night," Freddy Gray said. "Wait until—"

"Anybody could steal it on a dark night," I said scornfully. "I'm going to take it right out from under his nose. Tonight."

I began putting on my clothes. My heart was thudding in my chest. I didn't taste watermelon any more; I tasted fear. But it was too late to stop now. Besides, I didn't want to stop.

We dressed silently, and I led the way up the creek bank. We came opposite the watermelon field and ducked down the bank. We pushed through the willows on the other side and looked towards the barn. We could see Mr. Wills very plainly. The gun was cradled in his arms, glinting from the moonlight.

"You'll never make it," J.D. said in a quiet, fateful voice. "He'll see you before you're six steps away from the creek."

"You don't think I mean to walk, do you?" I said.

I pushed myself out away from them, on my belly in the grass that grew up around the watermelon hills. I was absolutely flat, closer to the earth than I thought it was possible to get. I looked back once, to see their white faces watching me out of the willows.

I went on, stopping once in a while to look cautiously up towards the barn. He was still there, still quiet. I met a terrapin taking a bite out of a small melon. Terrapins love watermelon, better than boys do. I touched him on the shell and whispered, "Hullo, brother," but he didn't acknowledge my greeting. He just drew into his shell. I went on, wishing I was equipped like a terrapin for the job outside as well as inside.

It seemed to take for ever to reach the great melon in the middle of the field. With every move, I expected Mr. Wills to see me. Fortunately the grass was high enough to cover me. At last the melon loomed up before me, deep green in the moonlight, and I gasped at the size of it. I'd never seen it so close.

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I lay still for a moment, panting. I didn't have the faintest idea how to get it out of the field. Even if I'd stood up, I couldn't have lifted it by myself. A melon is the slipperiest, most cumbersome object in the world. And this was the largest I'd ever seen. It was not a long melon, but a fat round one. Besides, I didn't dare stand up . . .

For minutes I didn't move. I lay there, my nostrils breathing up the smell of the earth and the musty smell of the watermelon vines, and I wondered why I was out here in the middle of all that moonlight on such a venture. There was more to it than just bravado. I was proving something to myself—and to Mr. Wills and Willadean.

I thought of a tempting way out then. I would carve my name into the deep greenness of the melon. Mr. Wills would see it the next morning when he inspected the melon, and he would know that I could have stolen it if I'd wanted to. But no—crawling to the melon wasn't the same thing as actually taking it.

I reached one hand around the melon and found the stem. I broke the tough stem off close against the smooth roundness, and I was committed. I looked towards the barn again. All quiet.

I saw Mr. Wills stretch and yawn, and his teeth glistened; the moon was that bright and I was that close.

I struggled around behind the melon and shoved at it. It rolled over sluggishly, and I pushed it again. It was hard work, pushing it down the trough that my body had made through the grass. Dust rose up around me, and I wanted to sneeze. My spine was crawling with the expectation of a shot. Surely he'd see that the melon was gone out of its accustomed space.

It took about a hundred years to push that melon out of the field. I say that advisedly, because I felt that much older when I finally reached the edge. With the last of my strength I shoved it into the willows and collapsed. I was lying at the edge of the field.

"Come on," Freddy Gray said, his voice pleading. "He's—"

I couldn't move. I turned my head. Mr. Wills was standing up to stretch and yawn to his content, and then he sat down again. By then I was rested enough to move again. I snaked into the willows, and they grabbed me.

"You did it!" they said. "By golly, you did it!"

There was no time to bask in their admiration and respect. "Let's get it on out of here," I said. "We're not safe yet."

We struggled the melon across the creek and up the bank. We started towards the swimming hole. It took all three of us

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to carry it, and it was hard to get a grip. J.D. and Freddy Gray carried the ends, while I walked behind the melon, grasping the middle. We stumbled and thrashed in our hurry, and we nearly dropped it three or four times. It was the most difficult object I'd ever tried to carry in my life.

At last we reached the swimming hole and sank down, panting. But not for long; the excitement was too strong in us. Freddy Gray reached out a hand and patted the great melon.

"By golly," he said, "there it is. All ours."

"Let's bust it and eat it before somebody comes," J.D. said.

"Wait a minute," I said. "This isn't just any old melon. This is old man Wills' seed melon, and it deserves more respect than to be busted open with a fist. I'm going to cut it."

I took out my pocketknife and looked at it dubiously. It was small, and the melon was big. We really needed a butcher's knife. But when the little knife penetrated the thick green rind, the melon split of itself perfectly down the middle. There was a ragged, silken, tearing sound, and it lay open before us.

The heart meat, glistening with sweet moisture, was grained with white sugar specks. I tugged at it with two fingers, and a great chunk of the meat came free. I put it into my mouth, closing my eyes. The melon was still warm from the day's sun. Just as in my anticipation, I felt the juice trickle into my throat, sweet and seizing. I had never tasted watermelon so delicious.

The two boys were watching me savour the first bite. I opened my eyes. "Dive in," I said graciously. "Help yourselves."

We gorged ourselves until we were heavy. Even then, we had only eaten the heart meat, leaving untouched more than we had consumed. We gazed with sated eyes at the leftover melon, still good meat peopled with a multitude of black seeds.

"What are we going to do with it?" I said.

"There's nothing we can do," J.D. said. "I can just see us taking a piece of this melon home for the folks."

"It's eat it or leave it," Freddy Gray said.

We were depressed suddenly. It was such a waste, after all the struggle and the danger, that we could not eat every bite. I stood up, not looking at the two boys, not looking at the melon.

"Well," I said. "I guess I'd better get home."

"But what about this?" J.D. said insistently, motioning towards the melon.

I kicked half the melon, splitting it in three parts. I stamped one of the chunks under my foot. Then I set methodically to work, destroying the rest of the melon. The boys watched me silently until I picked up a chunk of rind and threw it at them. Then they swept into the destruction also, and we were laughing

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again. When we stopped, only the battered rinds were left, the meat muddied on the ground, the seed scattered.

We stood silent, looking at one another. "There was nothing else to do," I said, and they nodded solemnly.

But the depression went with us towards home, and when we parted we did so with sober voices and gestures. I did not feel triumph or victory as I had expected, though I knew that tonight's action had brought me closer to my friends than I had ever been before.

"Where have you been?" my father asked as I stepped up on the porch. He was sitting in his rocker.

"Swimming," I said.

I looked towards Mr. Wills' barn. The moon was still high and bright, but I could not see him. My breath caught in my throat when I saw him in the field, walking towards the middle. I stood stiffly, watching him. He reached the place where the melon should have been. I saw him hesitate, looking around, then he bent, and I knew he was looking at the depression in the earth where the melon had lain. He straightened; a great strangled cry tearing out of his throat. It chilled me deep down and all the way through, like the cry of a wild animal.

My father jerked himself out of the chair, startled by the sound. He turned in time to see Mr. Wills lift the shotgun over his head and hurl it from him, his voice crying out again in a terrible, surging yell of pain and anger.

"Lord, what's the matter?" my father said.

Mr. Wills was tearing up and down the melon patch, and I was puzzled by his actions. Then I saw; he was destroying every melon in the patch. He was breaking them open with his feet, silent now, concentrating on his frantic destruction. I was horrified by the awful sight, and my stomach moved sickly.

My father stood for a moment, watching him, then he jumped off the porch and ran towards Mr. Wills. I followed him. I saw Mrs. Wills and Willadean huddled together in the kitchen doorway. My father ran into the melon patch and caught Mr. Wills by the arm.

"What's come over you?" he said. "What's the matter, man?"

Mr. Wills struck his grip away. "They've stolen my seed melon," he yelled. "They took it right out from under me."

My father grabbed him with both arms. He was a brave man, for he was smaller than Mr. Wills, and Mr. Wills looked insane with anger, his teeth gripped over his lower lip, his eyes gleaming furiously. Mr. Wills shoved my father away, striking at him

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with his fist. My father went down into the dirt. Mr. Wills didn't seem to notice. He went back to his task of destruction, raging up and down the field, stamping on melons large and small.

My father got up and began to chase him. But he didn't have a chance. Every time he got close, Mr. Wills would sweep his great arm and knock him away again. At last Mr. Wills stopped of his own accord. He was standing on the place where the great melon had grown. His chest was heaving with great sobs of breath. He gazed about him at the destruction he had wrought, but I don't think that he saw it.

"They stole my seed melon," he said. His voice was quieter now than I had ever heard it. I had not believed such quietness was in him. "They got it away, and now it's gone."

I saw that tears stood on his cheeks, and I couldn't look at him any more. I'd never seen a grown man cry, crying in such strength.

"I had two plans for that melon," he told my father. "Mrs. Wills has been poorly all the spring, and she dearly loves the taste of melon. It was her melon for eating, and my melon for planting. She would eat the meat, and next spring I would plant the seeds for the greatest melon crop in the world. Every day she would ask me if the great seed melon was ready yet."

I looked towards the house. I saw the two women, the mother and the daughter, standing there. I couldn't bear any more. I fled out of the field towards the sanctuary of my house. I ran past my mother, standing on the porch, and went into my room . . .

I didn't sleep that night. I heard my father come in, heard the low-voiced conversation with my mother, heard them go to bed. I lay wide-eyed and watched the moon through the window as it slid slowly down the sky and at last brought a welcome darkness into the world.

I don't know all the things I thought that night. Mostly it was about the terrible thing I had committed so lightly, out of pride and out of being sixteen years old and out of wanting to challenge the older man, the man with the beautiful daughter.

That was the worst of all, that I had done it so lightly, with so little thought of its meaning. In that part of the world and at that time, watermelon stealing was not a crime. It was tolerated, laughed about. The men told great tales of their own watermelon-stealing days, how they'd been set on by dogs and peppered with salt-loaded shotgun shells. Watermelon raiding was a game, a ritual of defiance and rebellion by young males. I could remember my own father saying, "No melon tastes as sweet as a stolen one," and my mother laughing and agreeing.

But stealing this great seed melon from a man like Mr. Wills

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lay outside the safe magic of the tacit understanding between man and boy. And I knew that it was up to me, at whatever risk, to repair as well as I could the damage I had done.

When it was almost light I rose from my bed and went out into the fresh world. It would be hot later on; but now the air was dew-cool and fragrant. I had found a paper bag in the kitchen, and I carried it in my hand as I walked towards the swimming hole. I stopped there, looking down at the wanton waste we had made of the part of the melon we had not been able to eat. It looked as though Mr. Wills had been stamping here too.

I knelt down on the ground, opened the paper bag and began picking up the black seeds. They were scattered thickly, still stringy with watermelon pulp, and soon my hands were greasy with them. I kept on doggedly, searching out every seed I could find, until at the end I had to crawl over the ground, seeking for the last ones.

They nearly filled the paper bag. I went back to the house. By the time I reached it, the sun and my father had risen. He was standing on the porch.

"What happened to you last night?" he said. "Did you get so frightened you had to run home? It was frightening to watch him, I'll admit that."

"Father," I said, "I've got to go and talk to Mr. Wills. Right now. I wish you would come with me."

He stopped, watching me. "What's the matter?" he said. "Did you steal that seed melon of his?"

"Will you come with me?" I said.

His face was dark and thoughtful. "Why do you want me?"

"Because I'm afraid he'll shoot me," I said. My voice didn't tremble much, but I couldn't keep it all out.

"Then why are you going?" he said.

"Because I've got to," I said.

My father watched me for a moment. "Yes," he said quietly, "I guess you have." He came down the steps and stood beside me. "I'll go with you," he said.

We walked the short distance between our house and his. Though it was so near, I had never been in his garden before. I felt my legs trembling as I went up the brick walk and stood at the bottom of the steps, the paper bag in my hand. I knocked, and Willadean came to the screen door.

I did not look at her. "I want to talk to your father."

She stared at me for a moment, then she disappeared. In a moment Mr. Wills appeared in the doorway. His face was marked by the night, his cheeks sunken, his mouth bitten in.

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He stared at me absent-mindedly, as though I were only a speck in his thinking.

" What do you want, boy? " he said.

I felt my teeth grit against the words I had to say. I held out the paper bag towards him.

" Mr. Wills," I said, " here's the seeds from your seed melon. That's all I could bring back."

I could feel my father standing quietly behind me. Willadean was standing in the doorway, watching. I couldn't take my eyes away from Mr. Wills' face.

" Did you steal it? " he said.

" Yes, sir," I said.

He advanced to the edge of the porch. The shotgun was standing near the door, and I expected him to reach for it. Instead he came towards me, a great powerful man, and leaned down to me.

" Why did you steal it? " he said.

" I don't know," I said.

" Didn't you know it was my seed melon? "

" Yes, sir," I said. " I knew it."

He straightened up again and his eyes were beginning to gleam. I wanted to run, but I couldn't move.

" And my sick wife hungered for the taste of that melon," he said. " Not for herself, like I thought. But to invite the whole neighbourhood in for a slice of it. She knew I wouldn't ever think of anything like that myself. She hungered for that."

I hung my head. " I'm sorry," I said.

He stopped still then, watching me. " So you brought me the seeds," he said softly. " That's not much, boy."

I lifted my head. " It was all I could think to do," I said. " The melon is gone. But the seeds are next year. That's why I brought them to you."

" But you ruined this year," he said.

" Yes, sir," I said. " I ruined this year."

I couldn't look at him any more. I looked at Willadean standing behind him. Her eyes were a puzzle, watching me, and I couldn't tell what she was thinking or feeling.

" I'm about as ashamed of myself last night as you are of yourself," Mr. Wills said. He frowned at me with his heavy brows. " You ruined one half of it, and I ruined the other. We're both to blame, boy. Both to blame."

It seemed there ought to be something more for me to say. I searched for it in my mind and discovered only the thought that I had found this morning in the grey light of dawn.

" The seeds are next year," I said. I looked at him humbly.

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"I'll help you plant them, Mr. Wills. I'll work very hard."

Mr. Wills looked at my father for the first time. There was a small hard smile on his face, and his eyes didn't look as fierce as they had before.

"A man with a big farm like mine needs a son," he said. "But Willadean here was all the good Lord saw fit to give me. Sam, I do wish I had a boy like that."

He came close to me then, put his hand on my shoulder. "We can't do anything about this year," he said. "But we'll grow next year, won't we? We'll grow it together."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I looked past him at Willadean, and her eyes were smiling too. I felt my heart give a great thump in my chest.

"And you don't have to offer the biggest melon in the world to get folks to come visiting," I blurted. "Why, I'll sit on the porch with Willadean any time."

Mr. Wills and my father burst out laughing. Willadean was blushing red in the face. But somehow she didn't look mad with me.

Flustered, I began to beat a retreat towards the gate. Then I stopped, looking back at Mr. Wills. I couldn't leave yet.

"Can I ask you one thing, Mr. Wills?" I said.

He stopped laughing, and there was no fierceness in his voice. "Anything you want to, boy," he said.

"Well, I just wanted to know," I said. "Was there double-ought buckshot in that gun?"

He reached round and picked up the gun. He unbreeched it and took out a shell. He broke the shell in his strong fingers and poured the white salt out into his palm.

"You see?" he said.

"Yes, sir," I said, taking a deep breath. "I see."

I went on then—and the next year started that very day.

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SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD

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Across. 1, *Copy-cats.* 5, *Dogged.* 9, *Scarcity.* 10, *Threat.* 12, *Loser.* 13, *Leg-breaks.* 14, *Obey.* 15, *Supreme.* 19, *Intense.* 21, *Silk.* 24, *Talkative.* 26, *Gorge.* 27, *Glades.* 28, *Apparent.* 29, *Twenty.* 30, *True blue.*

Down. 1, *Castle.* 2, *Praise.* 3, *Cock Robin.* 4, *Totally.* 6, *Other.* 7, *Grenades.* 8, *Detested.* 11, *Ages.* 16, *Palsgrave.* 17, *Airtight.* 18, *Stellate.* 20, *Evil.* 21, *Sleeper.* 22, *Ordeal.* 23, *Pestle.* 25, *Adept.*

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GIRL WITH FAIR HAIR

" What are the women in the street like? " asked Mazargues

BY MAURICE DRUON

NIGHT had fallen when they lifted them out of the ambulances. Their captors' guttural tongue, of which they understood not a word, increased the feeling of unreality they had had ever since the ground had suddenly rushed up to hit them, or they had fallen into sudden darkness with just time to think, This is it!

Since then, a series of ill-connected images, like dotted lines on maps representing doubtful paths, had marked their passage from fit men to their present dubious state. Stretcher-bearers in uniform, enemies standing over them like executioners—though at that moment they would have felt a surge of hope and brotherly affection even at the approach of the hangman himself—lapses into unconsciousness, regimental aid-posts, sniffing gas through cold masks, the strange painlessness of surgeon's scissors cutting at their flesh, plaster pouring round their limbs, transit hospitals where they had seen nothing but the stains on the ceilings, the rubber-deadened jolting of trolleys against their necks, the smell of formaldehyde, ether, and dirty linen, dark ambulances and bright sparks of pain—all these had ultimately led to a nurse with heavy breasts and a crudely shining white room in which all eight of them had been laid in beds side by side.

Only two of them already knew each other, if belonging to the same regiment could be called that.

They could at least mention the same officers' names and say, " Oh yes! That tall dark chap, who always looked halfwitted! "

And this gave them a welcome illusion of friendship. Failleroy and Louviel managed to persuade themselves that they had often passed each other on the barrack square and drunk side by side in the same bar and gone to the same brothel on the same day.

" Didn't you once turn me back because my overcoat was dirty when you were on gate-guard? "

" Quite likely. Yes, I remember . . ."

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" Funny, isn't it? "

Failleroy's foot had been blown off by a mine, and the bone of his leg had been opened like a lily. Failleroy lay in the first bed, nearest the window hidden behind a black curtain.

Fat Louviel was lying flat on his back; his chest, neck, and head were encased in a breastplate and helmet of plaster. The ceiling lights hurt his eyes. He was sorry to be separated from Failleroy by another bed. Renaudier, most of whose face had been removed by a bomb, did not yet know he was blind; he had the irritating feeling that his hair had fallen over his face and had been carelessly caught in the dressings.

" It's queer to be shut up in a room like this and not even know where you are," said Mazargues, who occupied the sixth bed.

What was the name of the town? What was the shape of the building? What was it built of? Indeed, was there a town at all, or was this some country house that had been turned into a hospital with a big red cross on the roof? Yet, they thought they could hear the noises of a town outside.

" Anyway, chaps," went on Mazargues, " have you seen the nurse? She's got a front on her, that nurse! Ugly as she is, I could . . ."

He told them obscenely just what he could do. Mazargues came from the south of France, had bright eyes, and sticking-out ears. Half a dozen shell splinters had been removed from his back and buttocks. His wounds had aroused in him a strange state of priapism. It was continual and almost unbearable.

The lights were dimmed. Those who could went to sleep. The others dozed fitfully on waves of pain, listening to the blood hammering in their wounds.

Failleroy stared for a long while at the black curtain that hung beside him and entirely obscured the window; it was like the dark veil through which you must talk to a cloistered nun and, in this milk-white cube of a room, seemed to be masking the entrance to death's domain. The foot Failleroy had lost was absurdly painful.

Mazargues had difficulty in controlling his groans at the mere contact of his nightshirt.

In the morning, the nurse with the breasts like melons came into the ward and drew the curtain.

Light flowed into the room. The wounded men became conscious of its evil stench.

Failleroy raised himself on his hands a little. His short brown hair was wet with sweat and his feverish flush gave him a deceptive appearance of health.

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" Well, Failleroy, what's it like outside? " Louviel asked from within his white breastplate.

" Outside? " repeated Failleroy.

He rubbed his eyes.

" Damn this hair over my face! " muttered Renaudier; only his mouth was free of the bandages. " It's a bit of luck they put someone by the window who can see out. I hope in a few day's time . . ."

They all felt rather embarrassed. Failleroy looked out of the window and said, " It's not too bad outside. Can't complain. We're in a fairly decent sort of place. There's a little garden with a street beyond it, and then more houses."

He went on describing the view: the houses were low and built of brick. A little old man was walking down the street, reading a newspaper. Housewives were going out shopping.

The wounded men listened with silent attention.

The passing of a vehicle made the windows shake.

" It's a big military truck with chaps with rifles," said Failleroy.

" What are the women in the street like? " asked Mazargues.

Failleroy laughed and showed his fine white teeth.

" They're nothing to get excited about, my lad," he said. " They've not got much in the way of looks, I promise you."

" I don't care a damn whether they've got looks or not," cried Mazargues. " I just want a woman, do you hear, a woman! "

" You'd better get your behind cured first," said Louviel.

" And you're not the only one, you know," said the deep voice of the last man in the row. " The only thing is, we don't make so much fuss about it."

Failleroy retreated under the bedclothes and closed his eyes. But a moment later he sat up, and began looking out of the window again. Suddenly, he cried, " At last, here's a pretty girl! "

" Is there? " said Mazargues. " What's she like? "

" Fair. And her hair's done up in a bun at the back of her head. But she's pretty, all right! "

But then the doctor came in on his rounds. Since he had no common language with the wounded, he was like a vet who has to question by touch and supply his own answers. The nurse nodded as she noted his orders. While he was examining the wound of the last man in the row, who had drainage tubes in his stomach, they heard a stifled groan from behind the clenched teeth.

" I'm damned if I'll squeal in front of these bastards," he muttered, when his dressings had been renewed.

" Bastards or not, they look after us pretty well," another said.

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" Yes, funny, isn't it? " said Louviel. " They do all they can to blow us to bits, and then . . ."

" The human race is all crazy! " said the man with the drainage tubes sententiously.

The morning went by without incident. But a few minutes after noon, Failleroy said, " Ah, there she is again! She's looking this way."

He smiled and he raised his hand and waved, as if to say hullo.

" The little bitch, she turned her head away on purpose," Failleroy said, lying down again.

At about two o'clock, he saw the fairhaired girl go by again; she avoided looking up.

" I think she must be a typist," Failleroy told Louviel.

At six o'clock, she appeared again and, this time, Failleroy was able to announce triumphantly that she had looked up at the window for a long time.

He had to describe her in detail. What were her breasts like, her legs, her bottom, her ankles?

" Oh, I didn't notice her ankles."

" It's always the fools who have the best view," said Mazargues in exasperation.

Night brought its own pain and weariness. But, with the morning, came reassurance once again with the drawing back of the black curtain. And for the next few days, apart from the rhythm of temperature-taking, doctor's rounds, dressings, and meals, they lived by strange time divisions of their own, marked by a clock whose face recorded the passing of the fairhaired girl.

" Failleroy, you're in love," the others said.

" Not at all, can't you see I'm simply amused? "

But the other seven were in love too. It was as if the intrigue that was developing through the window was their own. They felt as if they had been there for an eternity, and that the fairhaired girl, invisible to all but one of them, had already passed by a thousand times.

Nothing else interested them. If, by chance, Failleroy was dozing at noon, one of them would shout, " Wake up, Failleroy! It's almost time! "

They knew that Failleroy had been a tailor before he had joined the Army.

" You could dress her," they said.

But Failleroy thought, How shall I be able to sit crosslegged on my table without my foot?

Mazargues could bear it no longer. He was rent with desire,

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jealousy, and wounded pride. He would have committed any betrayal, could he have done so. He longed to get out of hospital before Failleroy. Anyway, he won't look much hobbling about on crutches, he thought. Whereas he saw himself strolling through the streets of the town, his arse still a bit stiff perhaps, but square-shouldered, arrogant, and carrying all before him.

He kept on telling wild and obscene stories in order to attract attention.

And they kept interrupting him to shout, "Shut up, Mazargues!" Particularly when he brought the fairhaired girl into them.

"It's a pity we don't even know a single word of their bloody language," said Louviel to Failleroy. "Or I'd be able to write something nice on a big piece of paper and show it to her."

Then Failleroy had the idea of cutting a heart out of an old leave-pass. And three times he held it up to the window as the fairhaired girl went by.

And the next morning, as she passed, Failleroy smiled broadly. His smile contrasted with the puffy pastiness that had begun to spoil his good looks.

"She's wearing a heart-shaped brooch on her dress!" he cried.

"Which dress is she wearing?"

"The one with the green flowers!"

Another two days went by . . .

Then, one morning, Failleroy replied to their usual questions, "No, she hasn't come by."

It so happened that it was the very morning the doctor, on feeling Failleroy's leg above the stump, nodded his head in an interested way, gazed attentively at the temperature chart, and looked meaningly at the nurse, as much as to say, "Didn't I tell you so?"

That evening, when Failleroy was looking out of the window, he murmured, "It's not really surprising!"

"What?" asked fat Louviel.

Failleroy didn't answer.

"Do you mean your girl hasn't gone by tonight?" Louviel asked a moment later.

"Oh yes! She's gone by all right. But with another man."

"Perhaps it's her brother!"

"To hell with that! They're all whores, the whole lot of them!" said Mazargues with satisfaction. "It's not paper hearts you want to show them, it's—"

"Shut up, Mazargues!" cried the man with the drainage tubes.

There was sadness in the ward.

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After all, it's perfectly natural she should have a boyfriend, thought Louviel. But she might at least have been decent enough not to pass under our window with him.

Failleroy groaned a good deal during the night, though he was not conscious of doing so. He seemed to spend all the next day dozing; not once did he look out of the window, and the ward respected his sorrow.

And then, to everyone's surprise except the doctor's, that night he died.

His corpse was carried out and clean sheets were put on the bed.

Mazargues beckoned to the nurse with the big breasts and gave her to understand he wanted to be moved into Failleroy's bed.

The nurse was obviously sympathetic; and Mazargues was moved.

Mazargues hardly closed his eyes all night. His mind ran on green flowers, fair hair, and rosy, freckled flesh . . .

The nurse came in and drew back the long black curtain at the very moment Mazargues had at last fallen asleep.

He started awake, sat up like an exclamation mark, and looked out of the window.

" Lord! " he cried, and fell back on the pillows.

" What's up? What's the matter with you? Feeling bad? " the others asked.

Mazargues did his best to put a good face on it.

" Of course, I knew from the start that Failleroy was putting one over on us," he said. " I just wanted to make sure, that's all! "

Beyond the window there was nothing but a high grey wall and a rubbish heap.

And fat Louviel, imprisoned in his plaster helmet, felt the silly dampness of tears upon his face.

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Translated from the French by Humphrey Hare

IDENTI-KAT!

There is a story (shockingly untrue!) going around about Salvador Dali, the surrealist artist.

The story goes that Mr. Dali returned to his flat the other night to find a burglar climbing out of the window. With great presence of mind, Dali made a lightning sketch of the intruder, and handed it to the police. As a result of which the police have since questioned four horses, a Siamese cat, a pair of kippers and a corkscrew.

The Daily Mirror

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ENTREAT ME NOT

Anger goaded him to a faster pace—
he knew she followed

BY STEPHEN FRANCES

WHEN he returned home from his labour in the olive grove he saw the strip of tree bark placed down carefully in a certain way beside the animals' drinking trough and knew what he must do.

He slept fitfully that night, and was wide awake when the first faint glow of dawn dispelled the darkness. Carefully he propped himself up on one elbow and looked wistfully at the girl sleeping beside him. Her lips smiled. Her young innocence and childlike beauty gave him a stab of regret that he at once suppressed.

He slipped out from under the blankets and silently gathered together his clothing. The heavy rhythmic breathing of his parents in the other bedroom was louder when he opened the door, and he cast an anxious glance at his young wife before he silently closed the door again.

Once he was safely downstairs he moved with less caution, dressing himself, filling his wineskin and cramming his knapsack with bread and sausage. Last of all he removed the pistol from its secret hiding-place and thrust it into his belt beneath his leather jerkin.

The top bolt squealed when he pulled it back, and he froze until the steady breathing from above reassured him. The bottom bolt resisted him firmly until he applied more force, and then it yielded abruptly.

It shot back deafeningly, and he heard her moving about up above. When she called to him, he opened the door quickly and stepped out into the grey dawn; the door closed behind him and the latch fell with a sharp click.

With firm strides he crossed the patio and turned left along the cart-track. Chickens squawked and scurried away at his approach; his red setter stalked round the side of the house and yawned after him, and from the meadow one of the herd lowed mournfully.

As he settled down into a long-legged stride he breathed

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deeply and regularly, drinking in the cool morning air laden with the fresh smell of the dew-soaked grass and the rich black earth.

He left the cart-track where it curved down into a valley, and walked on steadily across stony grassland that sloped up towards the distant foothills. Though he heard her calling, he strode resolutely on until she caught up with him and tugged at his arm. "Anton," she panted, "stop. I am your wife—you must listen to me."

"Go home, woman," he ordered sternly.

When she had realised he had left the house she had leapt from her bed, pausing only long enough to pull on a cotton dress. Now she stepped in front of him, thrusting at him with her strong young arms and forcing him to halt.

"Anton," she pleaded, "listen to me."

Her simple black dress was shapeless and bleached by the hot sun; one plaited pigtail hung down across her shoulder, and her eyes were so wide she seemed even more like a child.

"Leave me, woman," he said gruffly. "I have work to do."

"I am not blind," she told him, and her eyes shone with unshed tears. "You have received the call and you go to join them."

His head went high as he squared his shoulders. "These are matters for men only, and not for women's idle chatter," he said sternly.

She clung to him. "But it is madness. Let the others do as they wish. But you have me, Anton. You cannot leave me."

His brow furrowed with inner pain but his eyes gleamed proudly. "Away with you, woman. Have you no pride in the blood that runs in your veins? Are we to live for ever with an iron heel upon our necks? Does liberty have no meaning for you?"

"I care nothing for words, Anton. It is you I want. I have need of you." She paused a moment and then added, "*We* have need of you, Anton."

The special meaning in her voice drew his eyes down to meet her childlike gaze, and pride and excitement suddenly rang in his voice. "Are you sure? So soon? Can you be sure?" And then when she would not meet his eyes, he sighed sadly "It is not true then."

"But it might be," she urged. "We cannot be sure it is not so."

His eyes reflected the battle that waged within him. Then his head went high and his tone became determined. "Go back to the kitchen where you belong and do not meddle in the affairs of men."

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She recognised the authority in his voice but dared to disobey. "Where you go, I will go."

"You will return home," he stated flatly.

"I will *not* leave you." She stood fearlessly, prepared to pay for her obstinacy. "Beat me if you wish, Anton. But I will not leave you."

His face became expressionless, and he towered over her threateningly. Then abruptly he brushed her to one side and strode on with averted eyes.

She stared after him, tears glistening on her cheeks and then she resolutely followed him, her brown, bare feet gleaming as she matched his pace.

He set off across the stony grasslands, his long stride untiring and bringing the foothills ever closer. Although he would not turn his head he knew she followed him, and anger goaded him to a faster pace. But when the sun was almost overhead she was still following him doggedly.

He changed his route then, following an overgrown path that wound up into the foothills until it met a mountain torrent that cascaded over sharp, toothed rocks. From there on he climbed steadily upwards beside the leaping water until the banks narrowed and the stream boiled through a deep chasm. He looked behind him then, and when she saw he had paused, she too halted. "Go home, woman," he shouted fiercely. "You can follow me no longer."

She watched him sullenly, looking exactly like a sulky child in her shapeless dress as she rubbed one bare foot against the calf of her other leg.

He looked from the girl to the chasm. It was wide. But not so wide that it was impossible to leap. He adjusted his knapsack and wineskin so they would not impede him and walked back a few paces to gain impetus and then hurled himself forward across the gap. His long legs were powerful and his footing was sure. He landed on the far side with inches to spare and turned to stare back across the foaming water.

"Go home, woman," he shouted. "Go back to your kitchen."

She approached the lip of the chasm falteringly and, when he turned his shoulders on her, her mouth quivered as she fought to hold back her tears. She stared after him forlornly as he threaded his way among clumps of bushes and boulders, steadily climbing ever higher.

Certain she could not follow him, he slackened his pace as the ground sloped even more steeply. When he crested the rise he paused and drank deeply from his wineskin while he calculated the distance he must still travel. The hill he stood upon sloped

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down gently and then rose again to blend into a steep mountainside almost five miles away. He must cross that mountain and the mountains beyond: a hard and wearing trek.

Again he tilted the wineskin to his lips, and as he brushed the back of his hand across his mouth he glanced behind him.

He could see her far below. She had followed the stream downhill until she had found a place where she could ford it. He held his breath with sharp anxiety as she fought her way through the surging water, the white torrent boiling breast high as it sought to tear loose her grip on projecting rocks. Once she slipped, and he choked her name aloud and sobbed with relief when she retained her grip.

When she reached safety she wrung water from her dress; and knowing how the icy coldness of the mountain streams will bite deep into the flesh, he drove his nails into his palms and said aloud, "Why, woman, why? Why will you not go back to your kitchen?"

Before she could raise her eyes to seek him, he strode on down the far side of the hill, out of her sight. But before very long she had crested the rise behind him and was following doggedly, stumbling, often pausing for breath but never allowing him to draw very far ahead of her.

Presently the ground inclined upwards again and an hour later the foothill had blended into the mountain and was shelving so steeply that even his strength was taxed as he trudged grimly upwards.

This was virgin terrain where cacti and thorn bushes grew tenaciously among sharp rocks that had broken through the thin topsoil. He had to pause frequently to regain his breath. But always behind him he saw a distant flicker of movement that spurred him on again.

Upwards he climbed, the smell of sweat and sage bush strong in his nostrils and the pulse of his blood drumming in his head. Thorns and cacti ripped at his trousers, his hands were torn by prickly bushes, and his legs became leaden.

When at last he neared the summit of the mountain he came upon the road where he had planned to rest. The road was a miracle of engineering, cutting sharply across the mountainside, winding and turning back on itself snakelike as it sought out the valleys and passes through which it could penetrate. If he had chosen to follow this road instead of cutting across the mountains, his journey would have been lengthened enormously.

He seated himself at the roadside, opened his knapsack, and ate hungrily. He steeled himself not to look round. Before him the mountainside ascended steeply to the summit which seemed

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almost directly overhead. The soil was loose and treacherous and so steep that in places he would be searching for toe- and fingerholds and relying on the strength of his arms to aid him to reach the summit.

When he had eaten his fill he placed what food was left on top of his knapsack . . . He had heard her heavy breathing before she gained the road, but had steadfastly resisted looking towards her. She sank down wearily some paces from him.

"I have left food for you, woman," he said. "Do as I say. Rest for a time and then return to your home."

"I go with you, Anton," she said. Her voice was faint but determined.

"I go where women may not go and to do a man's work," he said tonelessly.

"You will die," she choked, "or you will be wounded and hunted, pursued and driven far away so we may never meet again. This must not be, Anton. I am your woman. I will not let you do this thing."

"You have a traitor's tongue," he said quietly, "but this I forgive you because you are a woman and have no sense of what is important."

"Is *your* life and *my* life of no importance?" she blazed. "Is our happiness and our love to be shattered by meaningless words? I tell you, Anton, I care nothing for these things of which you speak. There is no companionship in death, no liberty so sweet as the right to have you at my side. Do you think I care for racial pride or the raising of a tattered banner when these things can only take you from me?"

Before she had finished speaking he was on his feet, his face stern as he shut himself out from the treason of her words.

"I go now where you cannot follow. Go home. Anger me no more with your foolishness."

For the first time he glanced down, and the next moment he had run to her and was kneeling before her.

"You followed me without shoes!" he whispered in awe, and took her tiny, bloodstreaked feet in his big hands and held them tenderly as though they were a bird that might fly away. "I did not *know*. It was madness to follow me."

"It is of no importance, Anton," she said simply, and her eyes were misty with happiness as he gently washed away the dust and the blood with wine from his wineskin.

"You should not have done this for me," he choked. "I am not worthy of it."

She stretched out her hand and lovingly stroked his thick hair. "The only real pain I suffer is when you are not at my side."

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He brushed his hand quickly across his eyes. "Do you think it is easy for me to leave you?"

"Then return with me now."

He stiffened and then looked up into her face. He shook his head slowly. "I follow the road that all our people must follow."

"I care nothing for the others. Come home, Anton."

His eyes were steady. "Would you have me named a coward? Could you bear the accusing eyes and the silence of contempt?"

"Yes," she cried defiantly. "It is we who are important; we two and the children I will bear you."

He stood up and his face was so grim that he had become a stranger. "I am one of my people and must do my part."

With quick strides he was across the road and climbing again, his footing sure and his body refreshed. She watched him with unashamed tears glistening on her cheeks. Then wearily she clambered to her feet and limped after him.

The memory of her pleading was with him as he climbed and soon he stopped to look back at her.

She was far below him but climbing tenaciously and, knowing the treachery of the loose earth and the outjutting rocks she had reached, he shouted an alarmed warning. "Go back. It is impossible to follow me."

She glanced up at him but did not cease to climb and, sensing what must happen, he called to her again. But already she was slipping, her fingers clawing frantically and the earth crumbling away beneath her toes so that she was rolling, sliding, and falling.

He did not see her hit the road because he had already launched himself downwards like a madman, braking himself with his heels and buttocks, throwing himself to one side when a rock loomed up before him, and losing his balance and rolling over and over. The last few feet to the road was a sheer drop and he fell awkwardly, pain shooting along his leg as his palms hit the gravel. He was up at once but his leg gave beneath him and the next moment she was bending over him, her large eyes wide with anxiety. "You are hurt?" she asked tenderly.

Her cheek was cut and dirt-stained and the black dress had been grazed into the skin of her shoulder, but she brushed aside his concern. "Lie still," she ordered, and then her slim fingers were gently tracing his pain.

"Your ankle is twisted," she said, "but it is not serious. No bone is broken."

He pressed his foot gingerly against the ground and stretched up his hand towards her.

"Rest a while," she urged. He gestured impatiently, and she sighed and helped him to his feet.

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He stood favouring his sound leg and hobbled a few painful paces. He had to rest then and his face was white and drawn.

"Lean on my shoulder, Anton. I will help you."

His eyes lifted to the mountain, and his thoughts raced on to that distant and secret rendezvous where soon the others would be gathering and preparing to strike their blow for liberty.

"See what your foolishness has caused, woman?" he accused bitterly.

She hung her head in shame. "I am truly sorry, Anton. If I could bear the pain for you, I would gladly do so."

"You have gained your wish," he stormed. "I cannot cross the mountain while I am lame."

"For that I am happy," she said simply.

His eyes flashed hatred but she was watching the far end of the road with sudden alarm. She clutched his arm, her voice urgent.

"Soldiers are coming. You have a gun?"

"Yes, but—"

"Give it to me," she almost snarled.

The roar of Army trucks was suddenly loud on the still air, and he kept his shoulders to the approaching convoy as he took the gun from under his jerkin.

Her fingers were swift and sure as they drew the leather cord from the wineskin and tied it to the gun. She looped the cord round her neck and thrust the gun into her bodice where it hung down, concealed by the shapelessness of her dress.

"Anton," she pleaded, "please take care," and her fingers were a restraining pressure on his arm as the leading truck ground to a standstill. Uniformed men leapt down and trained rifles on them.

Their officer watched aloofly from a distance as a corporal gestured fiercely.

Anton trembled with inner rage, and sensing it she pressed her restraining fingers fiercely into his arm until he reluctantly obeyed the shouted order and slowly raised his hands above his head. His lips became a thin hard line as an experienced hand ran over him searching for concealed weapons.

But when the soldier turned to her she dropped her hands quickly, stepped back a pace, and hissed angrily through her teeth.

The soldier hesitated and the corporal said, "Leave the woman." Turning back to Anton, he held out his hand. "Your papers."

Anton drew out his papers and the corporal gave a cursory glance before returning them.

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"What is your business here?" he demanded.

She placed her hands on her hips and flared at him, her eyes flashing, her voice screeching. "So now it's a crime to search for lost sheep!" She tossed her head scornfully. "Call yourselves men, bristling with guns and frightening little children." She glared at the officer. "It'd do some people good to learn what a hard day's work is like."

The corporal smothered a smile and the officer stared disdainfully into nowhere.

"Call yourselves men!" she jeered.

The officer turned back to the truck and climbed aboard. He signalled impatiently and the soldiers clambered in.

The corporal stepped closer to Anton. "You've hurt your foot?"

Again her fingers were pressing into Anton's arm, and obeying their restraint he remained silent.

"One of our trucks will be coming back this way. The driver will give you a lift."

Anton said nothing because of the restraining fingers. But he turned his head to one side and deliberately spat his contempt.

The corporal flushed. "To hell with you," he growled, and strode off to the truck.

Anton waited until the last of the convoy had passed before he spoke. "We must send a warning. This may be a trap."

"Our people need no warning," she said with tired conviction. "The mountains are alive with ears and eyes, and they will know of the soldiers' coming long before we can carry a warning to them."

He nodded thoughtfully and was suddenly more cheerful. "They will learn of the soldiers and abandon their plans for tomorrow!"

"Put your arm round my shoulder and lean your weight upon me. I am strong, Anton. I can support you."

Slowly he hobbled along the road towards home, resting his weight heavily upon her shoulders.

"I have not failed them, after all," he said with relief.

"No, Anton."

"But you have failed me. You disobeyed me."

"Yes, Anton."

"Are you not ashamed to have disobeyed your husband and caused him so much trouble?"

Her slim arm was around his waist and she squeezed him gratefully. "I am a wicked and disobedient woman," she agreed happily. "But I am *your* woman. What is more, I still have you at my side."

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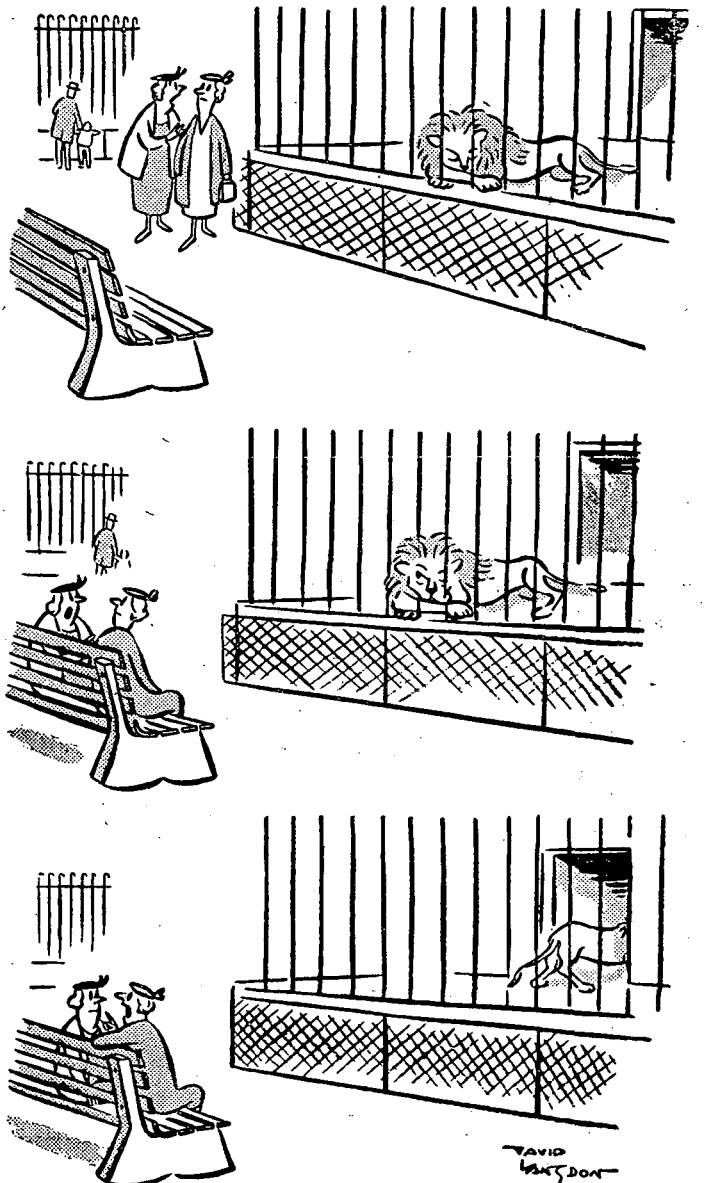

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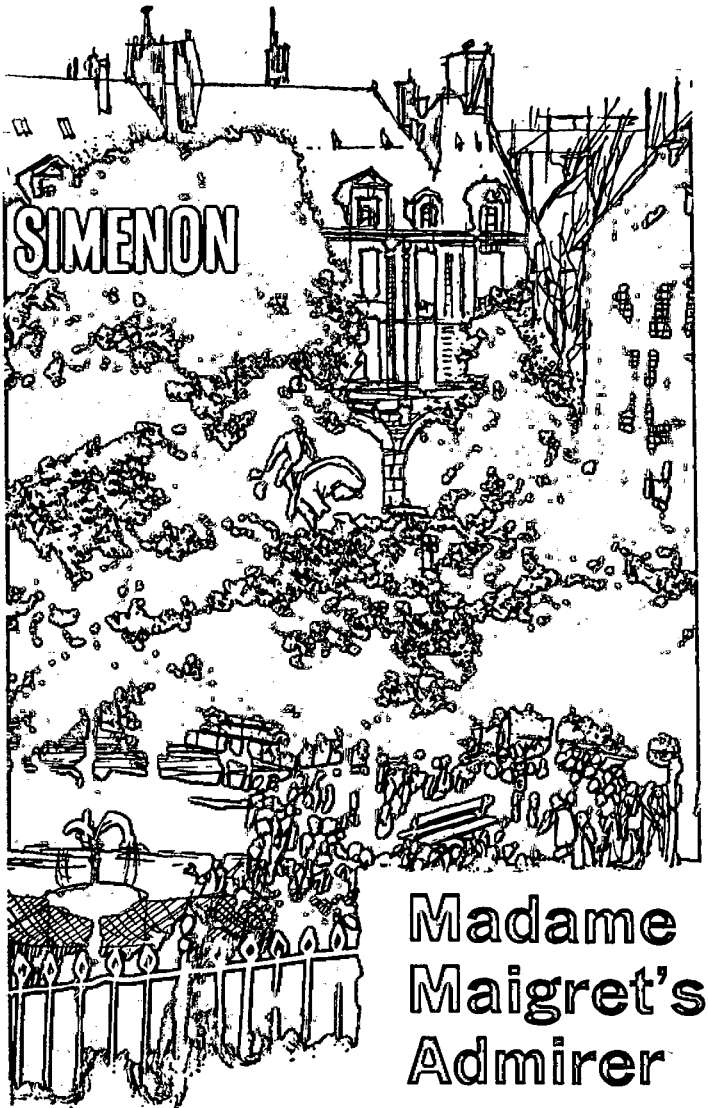

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IN THE MAIGRET household, as in most families, certain traditions had developed which had come, in time, to acquire almost a ritual significance.

For instance, after they had been living in the place des Vosges for years and years, the Inspector had acquired the habit, in summer, of beginning to loosen the knot of his dark tie as he started up the stairway from the court—a process which lasted exactly the length of time it took him to reach the first floor.

The apartment house, like all those on the place, had once been a sumptuous mansion; the first flight of the staircase rose majestically with wrought-iron railings and imitation marble walls. But the second flight became narrow and steep; and thus Maigret, who was growing rather short of wind, could mount to his own floor with his collar open.

By the time he had gone down a dimly lit corridor and inserted his key in his own door—the third on the left—he would have his jacket over his arm. Unfailingly he would call out, " Here I am! " sniff around, deduce from the aromas what there was for lunch, then enter the dining-room, where the large window would be open upon the dazzling spectacle of the place where four fountains sang.

This June there was a slight addition to the ritual.

The weather was particularly hot. The P.J.—Police Judiciaire—thought of nothing but their holidays. Occasionally gentlemen could be seen in shirtsleeves on the smartest boulevards; and beer poured in torrents at every pavement café.

" Have you seen your admirer? " Maigret would ask his wife as he settled himself by the window and mopped his brow.

No one would have thought, at this moment, that he had just come from hours of work in that anti-criminal laboratory which is the Judiciary Police—hours of poring over the darkest and most disheartening involutions of the human soul. When he was off duty, the least trifle could amuse him, especially when it involved teasing the ever naïve Madame Maigret. For two weeks now, his standing joke had been to ask her for news of her admirer.

" Has he taken his two little prowls round the place? Is he still just as mysterious, just as distinguished? When I think that you have a weakness for distinguished men . . . and married me! "

Madame Maigret would be coming and going from kitchen to table. She had no use for a maid; a cleaning woman for the

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heavy work was enough. She would play his game with faint irritation: "I never said he was distinguished!"

"Ah, but you've described him. Pearl-grey hat, little pointed moustaches—probably dyed—cane with a carved ivory head . . ."

"Go on! Laugh! Some day you'll admit I'm right. This isn't just a man like anybody else. There's something serious behind the way he's acting . . ."

From the window one would notice automatically the comings and goings on the place—somewhat deserted in the morning but filled in the afternoon with the mothers and nursemaids of the neighbourhood, sitting on the benches and watching the children at play.

The square, girded with grillework, is one of the most typical in Paris. The houses stand about it in precise identity, with their arcades and their steep slate roofs. And the four fountains sing . . .

At first Madame Maigret had only given the stranger a casual glance. It would have been difficult for him not to attract some notice, for both in appearance and in attitude he seemed twenty or thirty years out of date—an elderly gallant such as one now sees only in the cartoons of humorous magazines. It was early one morning, when all the windows round the place were open, and you could watch the servants going about their housework.

He looks as if he were hunting for something, Madame Maigret thought to herself.

That afternoon she had gone to visit her sister. The next morning, at precisely the same hour, she rediscovered her stranger. With even stride he strolled round the place, once, twice, then vanished in the direction of the boulevard.

"Fellow with a weakness for pretty housemaids—likes to watch them shake out the rugs," said Maigret, when his wife, relating the day's events, brought up her elderly gallant.

But that very afternoon she was not a little startled to see him, at three o'clock, sitting on a bench directly facing her house—motionless, both hands clasped on the ivory head of his cane. At four, he was still there. Not until five did he rise and go off down the rue des Tournelles, without having exchanged a word with anyone, without so much as having glanced at a newspaper.

"Don't you think there's something funny about that, Maigret?" For Madame Maigret had always called her husband by his family name.

"I told you once: he was happy just watching the pretty little maids around him."

The next day Madame Maigret brought it up again. "I kept

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a sharp eye on him; he sat there two hours on the same bench without a move . . ."

"Come now! Maybe it was to watch you! From that bench anybody can see into our apartment, and this gentleman is in love with you and—"

"Don't be silly!"

"Besides, he uses a cane and you've always loved men with canes. I'll bet he wears a monocle."

"And why, pray?"

"You've always had a weakness for men with monocles."

They chaffed each other gently, securely savouring the inner peace of twenty years of marriage.

"But listen! I looked all around him, very carefully. To be sure, there was one maid, sitting right opposite him. She's a girl I'd already noticed at the fruit shop first of all because she's so pretty, then because she seems very distinguished . . ."

"That's it!" Maigret cried triumphantly. "Your distinguished servant sits opposite your distinguished gentleman. You may have noticed that women are apt to sit down without too much heed to the perspectives which they may uncover; so your admirer has spent the afternoon leering at—"

"That's all you ever think of!"

"Since I haven't yet seen your mystery-man—"

"Can I help it if he never shows up when you're at home?"

And Maigret, whose life intersected so many tragedies, plunged himself into these simple pleasantries and never forgot to demand the latest news of the individual who had become, in their private language, Madame Maigret's admirer.

"Go on; laugh if you want to. But just the same there's something about him, I don't know what, but it fascinates me and makes me just a little afraid . . . I don't know how to say it. When once you look at him, you can't take your eyes off him. For hours on end he just sits there and doesn't move a muscle. He doesn't even shift his eyes behind his glasses."

"You can see behind his glasses . . . from here?"

Madame Maigret almost blushed, as though caught red-handed. "I went over to look at him closer. Especially I wanted to see if you were right about—perspectives. Well, the blonde maid always has two children with her and she couldn't be more proper and you can't see a thing."

"She stays there all the afternoon too?"

"She comes around three, usually before *he* does. She always has her crocheting with her. They leave at almost the very same moment. For whole hours she works at her crocheting without so much as raising her head excepting to call the children . . ."

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"And you really don't think, darling, that the Paris squares are full of hundreds of maids knitting or crocheting for hours on end while they mind their employers' children?"

"Well, maybe . . ."

"And just as many retired old men who have no interest in life but to warm themselves in the sun while contemplating an agreeable young figure?"

"But this one isn't old!"

"You told me yourself that his moustache was dyed and he must be wearing a wig."

"Yes, but that doesn't make him old."

"About my age, then?"

"Sometimes he acts older and sometimes younger."

And Maigret grumbled, with assumed jealousy, "One of these days I'll have to go over there in person and settle accounts with this admirer of yours!"

Neither of them took any of this seriously. In the same way they had for some time taken a great and playful interest in a loving pair who met every night under the arcades. The Maigrets had followed intently each quarrel, each reconciliation, until the girl, who worked at the creamery, had one night met another young man at precisely the same spot.

"You know, Maigret . . ."

"What?"

"I've been thinking. I've been wondering if that man is there to spy on somebody . . ."

The days went by and the sun grew hotter and hotter. Now, in the evening, the place was filled with an ever denser crowd of working people from the nearby streets who came seeking a little fresh air by the four fountains.

"What looks funny to me is that he never sits down in the mornings. And why does he always walk round the place twice, as if he were waiting for a signal?"

"What's your pretty blonde doing all this time in the morning?"

"I can't see her then. She works in a house down on the right and from here you can't see what goes on there. I meet her when I'm marketing, but she doesn't talk to a soul except to say what she wants to buy. She doesn't even argue about the price, so she gets cheated at least twenty per cent. She always looks as though she were thinking about something else."

"Fine! The next time I need a really delicate investigation handled, I'll put you on it instead of my men."

"Make fun of me! Go on! But some day you'll see . . ."

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It was eight o'clock. Maigret had finished dinner—amazingly early, since he was usually kept late at the Quai des Orfèvres. He was in shirtsleeves, his pipe in his mouth, his elbows resting on the window while he vaguely contemplated the rosy sky, soon to be invaded by darkness, and the place des Vosges, filled with a crowd exhausted by the precocious summer.

Behind him he heard the noises which meant that Madame Maigret was finishing the dishes and would soon join him with her sewing.

Evenings like this were rare—evenings with no dirty mess to clear up, no murderer to discover, no thief to shadow, evenings when a man's thoughts could roam at peace. Maigret's pipe had never tasted so good. Then suddenly, without turning, he called out, "Henriette?"

"Do you want something?"

"Come here."

With the stem of his pipe he guided her eye to the bench directly facing them. At one end of the bench a ragged old tramp was napping. At the other end . . .

"That's the one!" Madame Maigret asserted. "Of all things!"

It seemed to her almost indecent that her afternoon admirer should have so violated his schedule as to appear on the bench at such an hour.

"He looks as though he's fallen asleep," Maigret murmured, as he relit his pipe. "If there weren't two flights of stairs to climb, I'd go and have a look at your admirer, just to see what he's really like."

Madame Maigret went back to the kitchen. Maigret followed the argument of three small boys, who wound up rolling in the dust while more boys circled them on roller skates.

Maigret had not moved by the time his second pipe was finished. Neither had the stranger. The tramp had lurched off towards the wharves of the Seine. Madame Maigret had taken her place by the window, cloth and scissors and dress pattern in her lap—the housewife incapable of sitting still for an hour with nothing to do.

"Is he still there?"

"Yes."

"Aren't they going to close the gates?"

"In a few minutes. The watchman's beginning to herd people towards the exits."

The watchman seemed not to notice the stranger. The man on the bench still did not move and three of the gates were already locked. The watchman was about to turn the key in the fourth

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when Maigret, without a word, seized his coat and started downstairs.

From the window Madame Maigret saw him arguing with the man in green, who took his duties seriously. At last the man admitted the Inspector, who walked straight towards the stranger with the glasses.

Madame Maigret had risen. She felt that something was happening and she gestured to her husband, a gesture that meant, "Is this it?" She couldn't have said clearly what *it* was, but for days and days she had been apprehensive that *something* was about to happen. Maigret nodded to her, stationed the watchman by the gate, and climbed back to their apartment.

"My collar, my tie—"

"He's dead?"

"About as dead as anyone can be. For at least two hours or I'm losing my touch."

"Do you think he had an attack?"

Silence from Maigret. Tying a tie was always something of a problem for him.

"What are you going to do?"

"What should I be doing? Start the investigation going. Notify headquarters, the medical office, the whole works . . ."

A velvet darkness had fallen on the place. The song of the fountains seemed louder. As always, the fourth one had a tone a trifle sharper than the others.

A few moments later, Maigret entered the tobacconist's in the rue du Pas-de-la-Mule, made a series of phone calls, and found a policeman to station at the gate instead of the watchman.

Madame Maigret had no wish to go downstairs. She knew that her husband loathed the thought of her intervening in his cases. She understood, too, that for once he was at ease; no one had noticed the corpse with the glasses, nor the comings and goings of the Inspector.

Besides, the place was almost deserted. The people from the flower shop downstairs were sitting in front of their door, and the dealer in car accessories, in his long grey smock, had come over to chat with them.

They were astonished to see a car stop before the gate and proceed into the square. They drew nearer when they saw a second car with a solemn gentleman who must belong to Police Headquarters. At last, when the ambulance arrived, the group of curious onlookers had grown to almost fifty people, not one of whom suspected the reason for this strange assembly, since the shrubbery concealed the focal scene.

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Madame Maigret had not put on the lights; she rarely did when she was alone. She kept looking round the place, watching the windows open, but saw no sign of the pretty blonde maid.

The ambulance left first, headed for the Medico-Legal Institute. Then a car with certain people; then Maigret, chatting on the pavement with some men before he crossed the street and re-entered his home.

"Haven't you put on the light?" he grumbled, trying to see in the dark.

She turned the switch.

"Close the window. It's cooled off."

This was no longer the detached Maigret of a short while ago, but Maigret of the P.J., Maigret whose attacks of bad temper made young inspectors tremble.

"Stop that sewing! You get on my nerves! Can't you sit still a minute without work in your hands?"

She stopped. He paced up and down the little room, his hands behind his back, favouring his wife with an occasional curious glance.

"Why did you tell me he seemed sometimes young, sometimes old?"

"I don't know—just an impression. Why? How old is he?"

"He can't be more than thirty."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that this pal of yours isn't remotely what he seemed to be. I'm saying that under his wig there was young blond hair, that his dyed moustache was a phoney, that he was wearing a sort of corset which gave him that stiffness of an elderly gallant."

"But—"

"No buts about it. I'm still wondering just what sort of miracle made you sniff out this case."

He seemed to hold her responsible for what had happened, for his ruined evening, for all the hard work ahead.

"You know what's happened? Your admirer's been murdered, there on that bench."

"It isn't possible! Right in front of everybody?"

"In front of everybody, and undoubtedly at the exact moment when there were the most witnesses."

"Do you think that maid—?"

"I've sent the bullet down to an expert. He should phone me any minute."

"But how could anybody fire a revolver in the middle of—"

Maigret shrugged his shoulders and waited for the phone call. It came promptly.

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"Hullo! . . . Yes, I thought so too . . . But I needed you to confirm it."

Madame Maigret was all impatience; but her husband deliberately took his time, grumbling to himself as though it were no concern of hers. "Compressed air rifle . . . special model . . . very rare."

"I don't understand . . ."

"That means the fellow was killed from a distance—by somebody, for instance, lying in wait at one of the windows on the place. He could take his time to aim, but he must have been a first-class shot. He hit the heart exactly; death was instantaneous."

Like that, there in the sunlight, while the crowd . . .

Madame Maigret suddenly began to cry, from sheer nervous exhaustion. She apologised awkwardly, "I'm sorry. It was too much for me. It does seem to me as though I have something to do with this. I know it's silly, but—"

"When you've pulled yourself together, I'll take your deposition as a witness."

"Me? A witness?"

"Hang it, you're the only person so far who can give us any useful information, thanks to the curiosity that drove you to . . ." And Maigret went on, still as if talking to himself, to give her a few of the facts. "The man hadn't a single paper on him. Pockets practically empty, apart from a few hundred-franc bills, some change, a very small key, and a nailfile. We'll try to identify him anyway."

"Only thirty!" Madame Maigret repeated.

It was astonishing. And now she could understand the almost sinister fascination she had sensed in this youth congealed, like a wax image, into the postures of an old man.

"Are you ready to testify?"

"I'm listening."

"I ask you to note that I am questioning you in my official capacity and that I shall be obliged tomorrow to draw up a formal deposition as a result of this interview."

Madame Maigret smiled. It was a pale smile; she found this shift to an official relationship oddly impressive.

"Did you notice this man today?"

"I didn't see him this morning; I went marketing at the Halles. In the afternoon he was at his usual place."

"And the blonde maid?"

"She was there too, as usual."

"You never caught them speaking to each other?"

"They'd have had to talk very loud; they were about eight metres apart."

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"And they'd sit there, motionless, all the afternoon?"

"Except when the woman was crocheting."

"Always crocheting? For a whole two weeks?"

"Yes."

"You didn't notice what type of crochet work she was doing?"

"No. If it had been knitting, that's something I know about, but—"

"When did the woman leave this afternoon?"

"I don't know. I was making the custard. Probably around five, as usual."

"Around five . . . which is just when the doctor fixes the time of death. But there's a leeway of minutes one way or the other. Did the woman leave before five or after five, before the murder or after the murder? And why the devil did you have to pick today of all days to make a custard? If you're going to take up spying on people, you should carry it through to the finish!"

"Do you think that woman—?"

"I don't think anything! All I know is that I've nothing to base my investigation on but your reports, which are something short of detailed. Do you happen to know so much as where your blonde maid works?"

"She always goes home to 17 bis."

"And who lives at 17 bis?"

"I don't know. People with a big American car and a chauffeur who looks like a foreigner."

"That's all you've noticed, is it? You'd make a fine policeman, I must say! A big American car and a chauffeur who—" He was play-acting, as he so often did when an investigation led nowhere; now his anger dissolved into a smile. "You know, old girl, if you hadn't taken an interest in your admirer's carryings-on, I'd be in a beautiful jam right now. I'm not saying that the situation is perfect, or that the investigation will solve itself like *that*; but at least we've got something to start with, however slight."

"The beautiful blonde?"

"The beautiful blonde. And that reminds me—" He hurried to the phone and ordered an inspector stationed in front of 17 bis, if a beautiful blonde emerged, not to lose sight of her at any cost.

"And now to bed. There'll be time enough in the morning."

He was half asleep when the timid voice of his wife ventured, "You don't think it might be a good idea to—"

"No, no, and no!" He half sat up in bed. "Just because you very nearly displayed a minor talent is no reason to start giving me advice! Besides, it's time to sleep."

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And time for the moon to silver the slate roofs of the place des Vosges, time for the four fountains to continue their recital of chamber music, with the fourth seeming always a little hurried, a little out of tune.

When Maigret, face daubed with shaving-soap, braces hanging down, cast his first glance out over the place des Vosges, an impressive group had already gathered about the bench where the corpse had been discovered.

The owner of the flower shop, better informed than the rest since she had been present (even if at a distance) when the police arrived, was giving voluble explanations. Her categorical gestures emphasised the certainty of her opinions.

Everyone in the neighbourhood was there. Passers-by, who a moment before had been hurrying to be punctual at shop or office, had suddenly found time to stop at the scene of the crime.

"Do you know that woman over there?" The Inspector used the handle of his razor to indicate a young woman who stood out from those around her. The fresh elegance of her English-cut costume seemed more suited to a morning stroll on the Bois de Boulogne than to the place des Vosges.

"I have never seen her. At least I don't think so . . ."

It might mean nothing. The apartments on the first floors of the place des Vosges may contain the upper middle class and even the lesser levels of the world of Society. Still Maigret stared at the woman irritably; women of her class rarely set out afoot at eight in the morning, unless it's to walk the dog.

"Now, look: this morning you're going to do some extensive marketing. You're to go into every shop. Listen to everything they say, and above all try to find out anything you can about the blonde maid and her employers."

"And for once you can't make fun of me for gossiping!" Madame Maigret smiled. "When will you be back?"

"How can I tell?" For he knew the investigation had gone ahead while he slept, and he hoped to find at the Quai des Orfèvres some solid basis for his own inquiries.

At eleven o'clock the previous evening, for instance, the famous medico-legal expert, Dr. Hébrard, was in full evening dress, attending a first night at the Comédie française, when he received a message. He waited until the last act, and congratulated in her dressing-room an actress with whom his relations were non-professional. A quarter of an hour later, at the Medico-Legal Institute—which is the new name for the morgue—one of his assistants handed him his white working smock while an attendant withdrew from one of the endless niches in the wall the frozen corpse of the unknown man from the place des Vosges.

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At the same time, in the Palace of Justice, where the files contain details on all the criminals of France and most of the criminals of the world, two men in grey smocks patiently compared fingerprints.

Not far from them, up a spiral staircase, the specialists of the police laboratory began their meticulous work on certain objects: one dark suit (old-fashioned), two shoes (buttoned), one cane (rattan with carved ivory handle), one wig, one pair of glasses, and one tuft of blond hair cut from the dead man's head.

When Maigret had greeted his colleagues, held a brief talk with his chief, and entered his office—which still smelled of cold pipe smoke despite the open window—three reports were waiting for him, neatly arranged on his desk.

First, Dr. Hébrard's report:

Death almost instantaneous. Bullet fired from distance of at least twenty metres, possibly a hundred. Weapon of small calibre but great penetrative force.

Probable age: 28.

Complete absence of occupational deformations; probable that man had never done any manual work. On the other hand, evidence of extensive pursuit of sport, especially rowing and boxing.

Perfect health. Remarkable physique. Scar on left shoulder indicates bullet wound, probably deflected by shoulder-blade, some three years ago.

Finally, a certain thickening of the ends of the fingers indicates unknown had carried on fairly extensive work on typewriter.

Maigret read slowly, smoking his pipe in little puffs and breaking off now and then to watch the Seine flowing in the morning dazzle of the sun. From time to time he would jot down a word or two, which only he could understand, in the notebook renowned alike for its cheapness and for its accumulation, over the years, of a hieroglyphic mass of notes, written round and even over each other.

The laboratory report was no more sensational.

The clothes had been worn by others before their present owner; everything indicated he had bought them, untraceably, from a pawnshop or second-hand dealer.

Same origin for the cane and the buttoned shoes.

The wig was of reasonably good quality but nondescript—a model available at any wig-maker's.

Examination of the dust in the garments revealed a sizeable quantity of very fine flour—not pure, but mixed with traces of bran.

Glasses: unground glass, with no effect on the sight.

From the files, nothing; no trace of the victim's fingerprints.

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Maigret sat dreamily for a few minutes, his elbows on his desk. The case looked neither good nor bad—perhaps at the moment rather on the bad side since Chance, usually reasonably co-operative, had contributed not the slightest assistance.

At last he rose, clapped on his hat, and approached the usher stationed in the corridor. " If anybody asks for me, I'll be back in about an hour."

He was too near the place des Vosges to take a taxi. He strolled back along the Seine. In the fruit shop on the rue des Tournelles he noticed Madame Maigret in spirited conversation with three or four of the neighbourhood gossips. He turned his head to hide a smile, and continued on his way.

When Maigret first entered the police force, one of his chiefs, absorbed in the then new methods of scientific detection, used to keep telling him, " Look here, young man! Go easy on the imagination. A policeman works with facts, not ideas! " Which had not kept Maigret from using his imagination, and cutting out a nice little career for himself with it.

And so now, as he reached the place des Vosges, he was concerned less with the technical details of the morning's reports than with what he would call the *feel* of the crime.

He tried to imagine the victim, not as the corpse he had seen, but alive: a young man of twenty-eight—blond, heavy set, well built, undoubtedly elegant, putting on every morning his elderly-gallant outfit, his costume bought in the Flea market—and yet always wearing the best linen under it.

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Then taking two turns round the place and going off along the rue des Tournelles.

Where did he go? What did he do until three in the afternoon? Did he retain his role of the hero of some nineteenth-century comedy by Labiche, or did he have a room nearby where he changed?

How was it possible for him then to sit motionless for three hours on a bench, without opening his mouth, without making a single gesture, staring at one point in space?

How long had this been going on?

And where did he go at night? What was his private life? Whom did he see? Whom did he talk to? To whom did he surrender the secret of his personality? Why the flour and the traces of bran in his clothes? The bran indicated a mill rather than a bakery. What would he be doing in a mill?

Maigret's thoughts carried him past 17 bis. He retraced his steps, entered the gate and addressed the concierge.

She showed no reaction to his police badge. "Well? What do you want?"

"I wanted to know which of your tenants employs a maid—rather pretty, blonde, elegant—"

"Mademoiselle Rita?" she interrupted.

"Might well be. Every afternoon she takes two children out in the place—"

"Her employers' children. Monsieur and Madame Krofta—they've lived on the first floor for fifteen years and more. They were even here before me. Monsieur Krofta is in the import and export business; I think his office is in the rue du 4-Septembre."

"Is he at home?"

"He has just gone out, but I think Madame is upstairs."

"And Rita?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her this morning; I was busy doing the stairs . . ."

A few moments later, Maigret rang at the first-floor apartment. He could hear a noise far off inside, but nobody answered. He rang again. At last the door opened. He saw a fairly young woman, who was trying to cover her body with a pale blue dressing-gown.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to speak to Monsieur or Madame Krofta. I'm an Inspector from the Judiciary Police."

She opened the door reluctantly, holding the gown tightly closed in front of her. Maigret entered a magnificent apartment,

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with vast, high-ceilinged rooms, tasteful furnishings, and expensive ornaments.

"Do forgive me for receiving you like this, but I'm alone with the children. How did you manage to get here so quickly? It can't be fifteen minutes since my husband left."

She was a foreigner, to judge from a light accent and a thoroughly Central European charm. Maigret had already recognised in her the well-tailored woman whom he had noticed that morning, listening to the gossips in the midst of the place des Vosges.

"You were expecting me?" he murmured in a tone intended to disguise his astonishment.

"You or somebody. But I hadn't any idea the police would be so quick. I suppose my husband is coming back?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't see him?"

"No."

"But then how . . .?"

There was quite evidently a misunderstanding, from which Maigret could hardly help learning something useful. He had no intention of clearing it up.

The young woman, possibly to gain a moment to think things over, stammered, "Do you mind for just a minute? The children are in the bathroom and I can't help wondering if they're up to something."

She went off with supple steps. She was truly beautiful, in body as well as face.

He could hear her exchanging whispers with the children in the bathroom. Then she came back, a faint smile of welcome on her lips.

"Please excuse me; I never even asked you to sit down. I do wish my husband were here. He's the one who really knows the value of the jewels; after all he bought them."

Jewels? And why this faint discomfort, this impatience for the husband's return? She seemed almost afraid to speak, anxious to keep the conversation such that she could say nothing compromising.

Maigret had no desire to be helpful. He gazed at her with as neutral an expression as possible, putting on what he called his "fat-and-friendly" face.

"You keep reading in the papers about robberies but, it's funny, you never think it can happen to you. Why even last night I hadn't any idea . . . It was only this morning—"

"When did you get home?" Maigret put in.

She gave a start. "How did you know I went out?"

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" Because I saw you."

" You were here in the neighbourhood already? "

" I'm here all year round. I'm one of your neighbours."

This bothered her. She was obviously wondering what might be hidden behind words that were so simple, yet so mysterious.

" Why, I went out, as I often do, for a breath of air before I settled down to getting the children dressed. That's why you found me in such a state. When I come home, I always slip on something for around the house and . . ." She could not suppress a sigh of relief as she heard footsteps pause outside the door and a key turn in the lock. " My husband," she murmured, and called out, " Boris! Come in here."

Well, well! thought Maigret, so the husband's a good-looker too. Older than she is, forty-five at a guess, distinguished, well-groomed, Hungarian or Czech.

" The Inspector got here just ahead of you. I was telling him you'd come straight home."

Boris Krofta examined Maigret with a polite attention which more or less masked his distrust. " I beg your pardon," he murmured. No accent here; perfect French, even a trifle too perfect. " But—I do not fully understand."

" Inspector Maigret, Judiciary Police."

" How odd. And you wished to speak to *me*? "

" To the employer of one Rita who takes two children out in the place des Vosges every afternoon."

" Yes. But—you cannot mean that you have already found her, that you have recovered the jewels? I know that I must seem somewhat peculiar to you; but the coincidence is so curious that I keep trying to explain to myself. You must realise that I have just returned from the local police station where I lodged a complaint against this very Rita. I come home, I find you here, and you tell me . . ."

There was a nervous tension in his gestures. His wife, who had obviously no intention of leaving the two men alone, examined the Inspector with curious eyes.

" On what grounds did you lodge a complaint? "

" The jewel robbery. The girl disappeared yesterday, without giving us notice. I thought she had run off with a lover; I intended to insert an advertisement for another maid in the papers this morning. Last night we did not leave the house. This morning, while my wife was out, the idea suddenly struck me of looking in the jewel box. It was then that I understood Rita's abrupt departure; the box was empty."

" What time was it when you made this discovery? "

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" Barely nine. I was in my dressing-gown. As soon as I could dress, I hurried to the station."

" Meanwhile your wife returned? "

" Yes, while I was dressing. What I still do not understand is that you should arrive here this morning—"

" Pure coincidence! " Maigret murmured innocently.

" Nevertheless, I should like a few details. Did you know, this morning, that the jewels had been stolen? "

An evasive gesture from Maigret meant nothing either way, but served to augment Boris' nervousness.

" At least do me the favour of telling me the reason for your visit. I do not believe it is customary for the French police to invade people's homes, seat themselves comfortably, and—"

" And listen to what people tell them? " Maigret ended his sentence. " You must admit it isn't my fault. Since I got here, you've done nothing but talk about a jewel robbery which doesn't interest me in the least, since I came here because of a far more serious crime—"

" More serious? " the young woman exclaimed.

" You don't know that a crime was committed yesterday in the place des Vosges? "

He watched her think it over, remember that Maigret had said he was a neighbour, reject the possibility of saying no, and end with a smiling murmur, " I do think I vaguely heard something of the sort in the square this morning. Some of the old ladies were gossiping—"

" I fail to see," the husband interrupted, " what concern—"

"—this case is of yours? So far I don't know myself, but I've a notion we'll find out sooner or later. What time did Rita disappear yesterday afternoon? "

" A little after five," Boris Krofta answered without a shadow of hesitation. He turned to his wife. " That's right, isn't it, Olga? "

" Exactly. She brought the children back at five. She went up to her room and I never heard her come down. Around six I went up; I was beginning to wonder why she hadn't started dinner. By then her room was empty."

" Would you please show me to her room? "

" My husband will take you up. I don't like to go out in the halls like this."

Maigret could already have found his way around the house; its plan was almost identical with that of his own.

After the second floor, the staircase grew even narrower and darker before it reached the rooms under the roof. Krofta opened the third.

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"This is it. I left the key in the lock."

"Your wife said she was the one who came up here."

"Of course. But afterwards I came up too . . ."

The open door revealed what could have been any maid's room, with its iron bed, wardrobe, and washstand, save for the splendid view of the place des Vosges from the window set in the roof.

Beside the wardrobe there was a wicker suitcase in the current style. Inside the wardrobe were dresses and underclothes.

"Your maid went off without her luggage?"

"I imagine she may have preferred to take the jewels. Their value is approximately two hundred thousand francs."

Maigret's fat fingers examined a little green hat, then picked up another trimmed with a yellow ribbon.

"Can you tell me how many hats your maid had?"

"I have no idea. Possibly my wife can tell you, but I doubt it."

"How long was she with you?"

"Six months."

"You found her through an ad?"

"Through an employment agency, which recommended her warmly. And I must say that her work was impeccable."

"You haven't any other servants?"

"My wife insists on looking after the children herself, so that one maid is all we need. Besides, we live on the Côte d'Azur for much of the year; we have a gardener there and his wife helps with the housework."

Maigret was mopping his brow. His handkerchief fell to the floor and he bent over to pick it up. "That's funny," he muttered as he stood up. He looked Krofta over from head to foot, opened his mouth, then shut it.

"You were about to say . . .?" Krofta asked politely.

"I wanted to ask you a question. But it's so indiscreet that you might think it was out of place."

"Pray do."

"You insist? I wanted to ask you, just at random you understand, if . . . Well, the maid was very pretty: did you ever happen to have any relations with her other than those of employer and servant? Purely routine question, of course; you don't have to answer it."

Oddly enough, Krofta paused to think, suddenly more concerned than he had been. He took his time about answering, looked about him slowly, and finally sighed, "Will my answer be a matter of record?"

"There's every chance that it'll never come up."

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" In that case, I prefer to confess to you that what you suggest did indeed take place."

" In your apartment? "

" No. That would be complicated—the children, you know."

" You had dates outside? "

" Never! I would come up here now and then, and—"

" I can take it from there," Maigret smiled. " And I'm greatly satisfied by your answer. You see, I'd noticed that there was a button missing on the sleeve of your coat. Just now I found that button on the floor at the foot of the bed . . ."

He held out the button. Krofta seized it with astonishing eagerness.

" When was the last time that it happened? " Maigret asked.

" Three or four days ago . . . let me think . . . yes, four."

" And Rita was willing? "

" Oh yes—of course! "

" She was in love with you? "

" She gave that impression."

" You didn't know of any rival? "

" My dear Inspector! The question did not arise. If Rita had had a lover, I should never have considered him a rival. I adore my wife and my children; in fact, I cannot understand how I let myself . . ."

And Maigret went on down the stairs, sighing to himself, " As for you, my fine friend, I wonder if there was one minute when you weren't lying? "

He stopped at the concierge's lodge and sat down facing her. She was shelling peas. " Well, did you see them? They're certainly upset about this jewel business."

" Were you in your lodge yesterday at five? "

" Yes, I was. And my son was just where you are, doing his homework."

" Did you see Rita bring the children home? "

" Just like I see you this minute."

" And you saw her come down a few minutes later? "

" That's what Monsieur Krofta was asking me just now. I told him I didn't see a thing. He says it isn't possible, I must've left my lodge, I wasn't paying attention—after all so many people come and go. Just the same it seems to me that I would've noticed her, because it wasn't the right time for her to be going out."

" Have you ever run into Monsieur Krofta on the staircase to the third floor? "

" Go on—what would he be doing up there? Oh, I see . . . You think he'd be sniffing around the maid? You just don't

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know Mademoiselle Rita. Now they're saying she's a thief. Well, maybe she is. But when it comes to letting your employer fool around with you . . ."

Maigret resignedly lit his pipe and moved off.

"Well, Madame Inspectoress Maigret?" he joked affectionately as he settled down by the window. His shirtsleeves were two brilliant splotches in the sun.

"Well, for lunch you're going to have to be satisfied with a chop and an artichoke. I even bought them ready cooked to save time. The way these gossips go on . . ."

"What are they saying? Come on; let's hear the results of your investigation."

"First of all, Rita *wasn't* a maid—"

"How do you know?"

"All the people in the shops noticed she didn't know how to reckon in sous, which means she hadn't ever done any marketing before. Then you know how it is, they'll give a servant a rebate of one sou on every franc so she'll bring all the family trade to that store. Well, the first time the butcher offered her that, she just stared at him amazed. She did take it after that, but I'm sure it was just so she wouldn't look unusual."

"Fine! So we have a young girl of good family acting the part of a servant at the Kroftas'."

"I think she was a student. In the stores in this neighbourhood you hear them talking all kinds of languages: Italian, Hungarian, Polish. It seems she used to listen as though she understood, and if anybody made a joke she'd smile."

"And how about her admirer in the place?"

"People had noticed him, but not so much as I did. Oh yes—one more thing: the Gastambides' maid spends a lot of her afternoons on the place, and she says that Rita didn't know how to crochet and the only thing you could use that piece she was making for would be a dish-cloth."

Maigret's small eyes smiled at his wife's intent efforts to gather her memories and express them methodically.

"And that isn't all. Before her, the Kroftas had a maid from their own country and they dismissed her because she was in the family way."

"By Krofta?"

"Oh no! He's too much in love with his wife. They say he's so jealous that they hardly have any company at all."

Thus all these bits of gossip, true or false, sincere or malicious, served moment by moment to alter the portraits of the characters—or perhaps to complete them.

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" Since you've done such a good job," Maigret murmured, as he lit a fresh pipe, " I'm going to give you a tip: the shot that killed our bewigged and bespectacled unknown was fired from Rita's garret room. It won't be hard to prove when we get around to a reconstruction. I checked the angle of aim from there; it agrees absolutely with the position of the body and the trajectory of the bullet."

" Do you think that she . . . ? "

" I don't know."

He sighed and put on his collar and tie; she helped him with his jacket. Half an hour later, he sank into his armchair at headquarters and mopped his face; it was even hotter than the day before, and a storm was brewing.

An hour later, all three of Maigret's pipes were hot, the ashtray was overflowing, and the blotter was covered with words and fragments of phrases crazily intertwined. As for the Inspector, he was yawning, obviously half asleep, trying to fix his eyes on what he had jotted down in the course of his daydream.

If Krofta had caused Rita's disappearance, the jewel theft was a sound device for averting suspicion.

That was attractive, but it proved nothing; the maid might very well have stolen her mistress' jewels.

Krofta hesitated before saying he had been his maid's lover.

That could mean that it was true and he was sick of it; it could also mean that it was false, that he had seen Maigret pick up the button or thought the Inspector's question concealed some sort of trap.

According to Krofta, the button had been there for four days; but the floor looked as though it had been recently swept.

And why had Madame Krofta gone for a walk so early this morning? Why had she hesitated to admit having heard of the crime, since Maigret had seen her stay so long with the gossips?

Why had Krofta asked the concierge if she'd seen Rita go out?

Private investigation on his own? Or wasn't it more likely that he knew the police would ask the question, and hoped to plant a suggestion in the woman's mind?

Suddenly Maigret rose. This whole collection of details and remarks now no longer merely irritated him, but began to oppress him painfully. Wherever he turned, it was impossible not to end with the question: Where is Rita?

In flight, if she had murdered or stolen. But if she had neither murdered nor stolen, then . . .

A moment later he was in the Chief's office, demanding brusquely, " Can you get me a blank search warrant? "

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"Things aren't going so well?" The head of the P. J. smiled. Better than anyone else, he knew Maigret's moods. "All right, but you'll be discreet about it, won't you, Maigret?"

While the Chief attended to the warrant, Maigret was called to the phone.

"I have just thought of something!" Madame Maigret's voice was excited and worried. "I don't know if I ought to say it over the phone."

"Tell me anyway."

"Supposing that it isn't the one you thought who fired the shot . . ."

"I understand. Go on."

"Supposing, for example, it was her employer—you follow me? I've been wondering if maybe she mightn't still be in the house? Maybe held prisoner? Maybe—dead?"

It was touching to behold Madame Maigret hot on the trail for the first time in her life. But what the Chief Inspector did not admit was that she had arrived at very nearly the same point he had reached himself.

"Is that all?" he asked ironically.

"Are you making fun of me? Don't you really think—?"

"In short, you think that if we institute a search of 17 bis—"

"Just think, supposing she's still alive!"

"We'll see. And meanwhile, try to make dinner a little more substantial than lunch . . ."

Madame Lécuyer, concierge of 17 bis, was assuredly a splendid woman who did her best to bring up her children properly; but she had the serious defect of getting easily rattled.

"You know how it is," she confessed, "with all these people questioning me ever since early morning, I don't know whether I'm coming or going . . ."

"Calm yourself, Madame Lécuyer." Maigret had installed himself by the window, near the boy who, as on the previous evening, was doing his homework.

"I've never done any harm to anybody and—"

"Nobody's accusing you of doing anybody any harm. All we're asking you is to try to remember. How many tenants have you?"

"Twenty-two. I should tell you the second and third floors are split up into little apartments, one and two rooms."

"None of these tenants associated with the Kroftas?"

"How would they? The Kroftas are rich people—they have their car and their chauffeur."

"By the way, do you know where they keep their car?"

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"Over by the boulevard Henri IV. The chauffeur hardly ever comes here, since he has his meals out."

"Did he come yesterday afternoon?"

"I don't know any more—I think so."

"With the car?"

"No. The car hasn't been here yesterday or today. Of course the Kroftas haven't really what you'd call gone out—"

"Let's see: was the chauffeur in the house yesterday around five?"

"No. He left at four thirty—I remember because my boy had just got home from school."

"That's right," the boy agreed, raising his head from his book.

"Now one more question: were any big boxes taken out of here after five? For instance, was there a removal van parked around here?"

"No, I'm certain of it."

"Nobody brought out any furniture, or packing-cases, or cumbersome packages?"

"What do you want me to say?" she groaned. "How do I even know how big a package you'd call cumbersome?"

"A package capable of containing, for instance, a human corpse."

"The saints preserve us! Is *that* what you're thinking of? You think somebody's gone and murdered somebody in my house?"

"Go over your memory hour by hour."

"No! I didn't see anything like that."

"No truck, no wagon, not even a handcart came in here?"

"I just told you!"

"There's no empty room in the house? All your vacancies are filled?"

"Every blessed one. There was one single room on the third, but that's been rented for two months."

At this moment the boy raised his head. Without taking his pen-holder from his mouth, he said, "And the piano, Mama?"

"What do you think that has to do with it? That wasn't a box going out; that was a box coming in—and having a frightful time with the staircase."

"They delivered a piano?"

"Yesterday at six thirty."

"What company?"

"I don't know. There wasn't any name on the van. It didn't come in here in the court. It was a big packing-case and three men worked at it for a good hour."

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"They took the case away?"

"No. Monsieur Lucien came down with the men to treat them to a drink at the corner bar."

"Who's Monsieur Lucien?"

"The man who rents that little room I was talking about. He's been up there two months—very quiet and well-behaved. They say he composes music."

"He's acquainted with the Kroftas?"

"I don't think he's ever laid eyes on them."

"He was in his room yesterday at five?"

"He came in around four thirty—about when the chauffeur left."

"Did he tell you then that he was expecting a piano?"

"No, he just asked me if there was any mail for him."

"Did he get much?"

"Very little."

"Thank you, Madame Lécuyer. Just keep calm now."

Maigret went out and gave his instructions to the two inspectors who were patrolling the place des Vosges. Then he re-entered the building, hastily passing the lodge for fear the concierge's berattlement might finally prove contagious.

Maigret did not stop at the first floor, nor at the second. On the third, he leaned over and made out the scratches which the piano had left on the floor. They seemed to end at the fourth door. He knocked, and heard muffled steps, like those of an old lady in bedroom-slippers, then a cautious murmur of, "Who is it?"

"Monsieur Lucien, please?"

"Next door."

But at the same moment another voice stammered several words. The door opened a crack and a fat old woman tried to make out Maigret's face in the dim light. "He isn't here right now, Monsieur Lucien isn't. Can I take a message for him?"

Automatically Maigret leaned forward to make out the second person who was in the room. In the half-light he could catch only a cluttered glimpse of old furniture, old clothes, and frightful ornaments. Through the crack of the door came that odour peculiar to the rooms of old people.

Near the sewing-machine a woman sat, stiffly, like a formal caller. Inspector Maigret experienced the greatest surprise of his career as he recognised his own wife!

"I happened to hear that Mademoiselle Augustine did a little dressmaking," Madame Maigret hastened to say. "I came to see her about that and we got talking . . . Do you know, she

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has the room right next to that maid who stole the jewels!"

Maigret shrugged his shoulders, wondering what his wife was leading up to.

"The funniest thing is that her other neighbour had a piano delivered yesterday—an enormous packing-case. It must be still there."

This time Maigret frowned, furious that his wife had, God knows how, reached the same results that he had. "Since Monsieur Lucien isn't in, I'd better go down," he announced.

He didn't lose a minute. The two police from the place des Vosges were posted on the staircase, not far from the Kroftas' door. A locksmith was sent for, and likewise the commissioner from the district station.

Monsieur Lucien's door was forced. In the room was nothing but a cheap piano, a chair, a bed, a wardrobe, and, against the wall, the packing-case in which the piano had been brought.

"Open that case!" Maigret ordered. The chips were down now, and he was frankly scared. He dared not touch it himself, for fear of finding it empty. He pretended to fill his pipe calmly, and he tried not to tremble when his man called out, "Inspector! A woman!"

"I know."

"She's alive!"

And he repeated, "I know." If there was a woman in the case, it had to be the notorious Rita; and he was morally certain she was alive, and tightly bound and gagged. "Try to bring her to. Call a doctor."

In the hall he passed Mademoiselle Augustine and his wife. Madame Maigret's smile was unique in the annals of their household—a smile to suggest the disquieting possibility that she might exchange the role of docile spouse for that of detective.

As the Inspector reached the first floor, the door of the Kroftas' apartment opened. Krofta himself was there, hyperexcited but still holding himself well in hand.

"Isn't Monsieur Maigret here?" he demanded of the two inspectors.

"Here I am, Monsieur Krofta."

"Somebody wants you on the telephone. From the Ministry of the Interior."

This was not quite correct. It was the Chief of the P.J. "That you, Maigret? I thought I could reach you there. While you've been up to God knows what in that house, the person whose phone you're using has put the wind up at his Embassy, and they've taken it up with the Foreign Office. The F.O.!"

"I get it," Maigret groaned.

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"Maigret, would you believe it? A *spy* case! The directive is to keep everything quiet, no statements to the press. For a long time Krofta's been his country's official agent in France. He's the *clearing-house* for the reports from secret agents."

Krofta had remained in a corner of the room, pale but smiling. Now as Maigret hung up, he suggested, "May I offer you any refreshment, my dear Inspector?"

"No, thank you."

"It appears that you have found my servant?"

And the Chief Inspector hammered out each syllable: "I found her in time—yes, Monsieur Krofta! Good day!"

"As for me," Madame Maigret said, as she put the finishing touches to her chocolate cream, "as soon as they told me the maid didn't know how to crochet . . ."

"Inspectoress," her husband nodded approvingly.

"They really could convey important information that way, for hours every day? I don't know if I understand it all, but this girl, this Rita, was really spending all her time spying on her employers?"

Maigret hated to explain a case, but in these circumstances it seemed too cruel to leave Madame Maigret in the dark. "She was spying on spies," he grunted. He shrugged his shoulders irritatedly. "That's why, just when I can lay my hands on the whole gang, they tell me, 'Not a move! Silence and discretion!'"

"That can't be very nice for you," she sighed, as though this excused all Maigret's previous bad temper.

"A fine case, just the same—with flashes of genius. Look at the situation. On one side the Kroftas, with all the reports for their Government passing through their hands.

"On the other side, a woman and a man—Rita and the 'old' gentleman on the bench, your strange admirer. Who were they working for? That's no concern of mine now. That's up to the Deuxième Bureau; spies are their pigeon. Probably they were agents of another power, possibly of a different faction in their own country. All the time they needed the daily intelligence reports received by Krofta, and Rita got hold of them without too much trouble. But how to pass them on? Spies are distrustful people. The least suspicious move would ruin her.

"Hence the idea of the old gallant and the bench. And the brilliant idea of the crocheting. Rita's hands were far more skilful than they seemed: *their jerky movements produced, not standard crochet patterns, but whole long messages in morse code!*

"Across from Rita her accomplice commits the whole business

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to memory. It's an example of the incredible patience of some secret agents. Whatever he learns, he has to remember word for word for hours until he spends the night typing it out in his rooms at Corbeill, near the flour-mills.

"I wonder how the Kroftas caught on to this cunning arrangement. Perhaps from the chauffeur who brought news about four o'clock."

Madame Maigret listened without daring to express the slightest opinion, she was so afraid Maigret might stop.

"Now you know as much as I do. The Kroftas had to get rid of the man first, then take care of Rita—but not kill her; they needed to know who she was working for and how much she'd been able to transmit.

"For some time Krofta kept a bodyguard installed in the house—Monsieur Lucien, a first-rate shot. Krofta telephones. Lucien arrives, loses no time in going to the girl's room and using his compressed air rifle to strike down the indicated target.

"Nobody sees anything, nobody hears anything—excepting Rita. She still has to bring the children back and play out the comedy, or she knows that the distant marksman will bring her down too.

"She knows what will happen to her. They try to force her secrets out of her. She resists . . . so far. They threaten her with death, and order the piano for Monsieur Lucien so that the case can be used to carry out the body. And meanwhile, who'll think of looking for her in the musician's room?

"Krofta's already arranging his defence. He makes his complaint, announces the maid's disappearance, invents the theft of the jewels . . ."

There was a silence. Evening was settling over the place. The sky was turning blue, and the four fountains were tuning their silvery sound to the liquid silver of the moon.

"And then you took over!" Madame Maigret said, suddenly and admiringly.

He looked at her dubiously. She went on, "It's so annoying, the way they kept you from pushing it through just at the best moment."

Then he burst out in unconvincing rage, "You know what's even more annoying? Finding you there in Mademoiselle Augustine's room! You, getting ahead of me! Though after all the case meant more to you," he smiled. "He was your admirer."

L'Amoureux de Madame Maigret © Georges Simenon
from the translation by Anthony Boucher

★ ***Enthralling new short novel by V. S. Pritchett in ARGOSY next month, on sale February 8***

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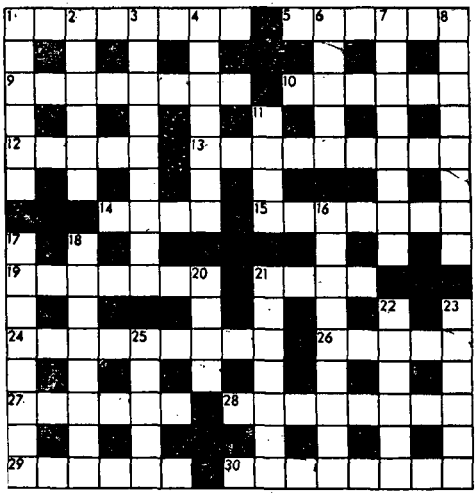

ACROSS

1 Imitators say miaow! (4-4).

5 This does it (6).

9 Want to mark metropolis (8).

10 The rat menace (6).

12 He never wins (5).

13 Cricketer's occupational hazards (3-6).

14 It's nothing to the governor to carry out orders (4).

15 Dine with the engineers. It's the greatest! (7).

19 Strained, in ten seconds (7).

21 Taken at the bar (4).

24 Vital Kate becomes chatty (9).

26 Devour the bait (5).

27 Joyful directions for clearings (6).

28 It's clear father looks both ways at tear (8).

29 Score went inside (6).

30 Faithful, whether dark or light (4, 4).

DOWN

1 Throw at the French rook (6).

2 Softly utter approval (6).

3 Sparrow's victim (4, 5).

4 Completely, little friend (7).

6 Not this. It's up to her (5).

7 Explosives end rages mix-up (8).

8 Loathed examination in fact (8).

11 Man has 7, says Shakespeare (4).

16 German Count visits friend's tomb (9).

17 Drunk in charge of an aeroplane? (8).

18 Star-shaped (8).

20 Live up to no good (4).

21 He dozes between the lines? (7).

22 Ed turns up in oral trial (6).

23 Useless without mortar (6).

25 Expert from a small department (5).

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